BY THE AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET" &c

LIKE AND UNLIKE

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A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN," "MOHAWKS"

ETC. ETC.

[M. E. BRADDON]

Stereotyped Edition

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LIKE AND UNLIKE

CHAPTER I.

CONTRASTS

"Has Mr. Belfield come in yet?"

"No, Sir Adrian."

"He rode the new horse, did he not?"

"Yes, Sir Adrian."

Sir Adrian Belfield moved uneasily in his chair, then walked to the fireplace, and stood there, looking down at the smouldering logs upon the hearth, with an anxious air. The footman waited to be questioned further.

"What sort of character do they give the new horse in the stables, Andrew?" asked Sir Adrian, presently.

Andrew hesitated before replying, and then answered, with a somewhat exaggerated cheerfulness, "Well, Sir Adrian, they say he's a good 'un, like all the horses Mr. Belfield buys."

"Yes, yes, he's a good judge of a horse—we know that. But he would buy the maddest devil that was ever foaled if he fancied the shape and paces of the beast. I didn't like the look of that new chestnut."

"You see, Sir Adrian, it's Mr. Belfield's colour. You know, sir, as how he'll go any distance and give any money for a handsome chestnut when he won't look at another coloured 'oss."

"Yes, yes; that will do, Andrew. Is her ladyship in the drawing-room?"

"Yes, Sir Adrian," said the footman, who was middle-aged and waxing grey, and ought long ago to have developed into a butler, only Belfield Abbey was so good a place that few servants cared to leave it in the hope of bettering themselves. The butler at Belfield was sixty, the under-butler over fifty, and the younger of the two footmen had seen the sun go down upon his thirty-second birthday. That good old grey stone mansion

amidst the wooded hills of North Devon was a paradise for serving men and women; a paradise not altogether free from the presence of Satan; but the inhabitants were able to bear with one Satanic element where so much was celestial.

Sir Adrian went to the window—a mullioned window with richly painted glass in the upper mullions, glass emblazoned with the armorial bearings of the Belfields, and rich in the heraldic history of aristocratic alliances. Like most Elizabethan windows, there was but a small portion of this one which opened. Adrian unfastened the practicable lattice and put his head out to survey the avenue along which his brother would ride home.

There was no horseman visible in the long vista—only the autumnal colouring of elms and oaks which alternated along the broad avenue with its green ride at each side of the road, only the infinite variety of fading foliage and the glancing lights of an October afternoon. How often had Adrian watched his twin brother schooling an unmanageable horse upon yonder turf, galloping like an infuriated centaur, and seeming almost as much a part of his horse as if he had been made after the fashion of that fabulous monster.

"They must have had a good day," thought Adrian. "He ought to have been home before now, unless they killed further off than usual."

He looked round at the clock over the fireplace. Half-past five! Not so late after all. It was only his knowledge that his brother was riding a hot-tempered brute that worried him.

"What a morbid fool I am," he said to himself impatiently. "What an idiot I must be to give way to this feeling of anxiety and foreboding every time he is out of my sight for a few hours. I know he is one of the finest horsemen in Devonshire, but if he rides a restive horse I am miserable. And yet I can sympathize with his delight in conquering an ill-tempered brute, in proving that the nerve and muscle of the smaller animal, backed with brains, can prevail over size and weight and sheer brute power. I love to watch him break a horse, and can feel almost as keen a delight as if I myself were in the saddle, and my hands were doing the work. And then in another moment, while I am exulting in his victory, the womanish mood comes over me, and I turn cold with fear. I'm afraid my mother is right, and that nature intended me for a woman."

He was pacing slowly up and down the room as he mused upon himself thus, and, coming face to face with a Venetian glass which hung between two blocks of book-shelves at the end of the library, he paused to contemplate his own image reflected there.

The face he saw in the looking-glass was handsome enough to satisfy the most exacting self-consciousness; but the classical

regularity of the features and the delicacy of the colouring were allied with a refinement which verged upon effeminacy, and suggested a feeble constitution and a hypersensitive temperament. It was not the face of one who could have battled against adverse circumstances or cut his way upward from the lowest rung of the ladder to the top. But it was a very good face for Sir Adrian Belfield, born in the purple, with fortune and distinction laid up for him by a long line of stalwart ancestors. Such a one could afford to be delicately fashioned and slenderly built. In such a one that air of fragility, tending even towards sickliness, was but an added grace. "So interesting," said all the young ladies in Sir Adrian's neighbourhood, when they descanted on the young baronet's personality.

For Belfield's own eye those delicately-chiselled features and that ivory pallor had no charm. He compared the face in the glass with another face which was like it and yet unlike—the face of his twin brother, in which youth, health, and physical power were the leading characteristics. Sir Adrian thought of that other face, and turned from his own image with an impatient sigh.

"Of all the evils that can befall a man I think a sickly youth must be the worst," he said to himself as he left the room and went across the hall to his mother's favourite sitting-room, the smallest in a suite of three drawing-rooms opening out of each other.

Lady Belfield was sitting in a low chair near the fire, but she started up as her son opened the door.

"Has he come home?" she asked eagerly.

"Valentine? No, mother," answered Adrian quietly. "Surely you are not anxious about him?"

"But I am anxious. How white and tired you look! I am always anxious when he rides a new horse," Lady Belfield exclaimed, with an agitated air. "It is so cruel of him to buy such wretched creatures, as if it were on purpose to torture me. And then he laughs, and makes light of my fears. The stud-groom told me that this chestnut has an abominable character. He has been the death of one man already. No one but Valentine would have bought him. Parker begged me to prevent the purchase, if I could. He ought to have known very well that I could not," she added bitterly, walking to and fro in the space before the bay window.

"Dearest mother, it is foolish to worry yourself like this every time Valentine rides an untried horse. You know what a horseman he is."

"I know that he is utterly reckless, that he would throw away his life to gratify the whim of the moment, that he has not the slightest consideration for me."

"Mother, you know he loves you better than any one else in the world."

"Indeed I do not, Adrian. But if he does, his highest degree of loving falls very far below my idea of affection. Oh, why did he insist upon buying that brute, in spite of every warning?"

"My dear mother, while you are making yourself a martyr, I daresay Valentine is walking that obnoxious chestnut quietly home after a distant kill, and he will be here presently in tremendous spirits after a grand day's sport."

"Do you really think so? Are you sure you are not uneasy?"

"Do I look it?" asked Adrian, smiling at her.

He had had to conceal his own feelings many a time in order to spare hers when some recklessness of the dare-devil younger-born had tortured them both with unspeakable apprehensions. Ever since he had been old enough to be let out of leading-strings Valentine had been perpetually endangering his limbs and his life to the torment of other people. His boats, his horses, his guns, his dogs, had been sources of inexhaustible anxiety to Lady Belfield and her elder son. It suited his temperament to be always in movement and strife of some kind; riding an unbroken horse, sailing his yacht in a storm, making his companions and playthings of ferocious dogs, climbing perilous mountain peaks; crossing the Channel or the Bay of Biscay, just when any reasonable being, master of his own time, would have avoided the passage—doing everything in a reckless, hot-headed way, which was agony to his mother's tender heart.

And yet, though both mother and brother suffered infinitely from Valentine Belfield's folly, they both went on loving him and forgiving him with an affection that knew no diminution, and which he accepted with a carelessness that was akin to contempt.

"You look pale, and fagged, and ill," said Lady Belfield, scrutinizing her son with anxious eyes. "I know you are just as frightened as I am, though you hide your uneasiness for my sake. You are always so good to me, Adrian:" this with a tone that seemed half apologetic, as if she would have said, "I lavish the greater half of my affection on your brother, and yet you give me so much."

"Dear mother, what should I be but good to the best and kindest of parents?"

"Oh, but I am more indulgent to him than to you. You have never tried me as he has done, and yet——"

"And yet I love him better than I love you." That was the unspoken ending of her speech.

She went to the window, brushing away her tears—tears of remorseful feeling, tears of sorrowing love, tears which she half knew were wasted upon an unworthy object.

"Cheer up, mother," said Adrian lightly. "It will never do for Valentine to surprise us in this tragical mood. He will indulge his wit at our expense all the evening. If you want him to get rid of the chestnut say not one word about danger. You might remark in a careless way that the animal has an ugly head, and does not look so well bred as his usual stamp of horse—that is a safe thing to say to any man—and if he tells us a long story of a battle royal with the beast, be sure you put on your most indifferent air, as if the thing were a matter of course, and nobody's business but his own; and before the week is out he will have sold the horse or swopped him for another, and, as he could hardly find one with a worse character, your feelings will gain by the change. He is a dear fellow, but there is a vein of opposition in him."

"Yes, he loves to oppose me; but after all he is not a bad son, is he, Adrian?"

"A bad son! Of course not; whoever said he was?"

"No one: only I am afraid I spoke bitterly about him just now. He is always keeping my nerves on the rack by his recklessness in one way or the other. He is so like his poor father—so terribly like."

Her voice grew hushed and grave almost to solemnity as she spoke of her dead husband. She had been a widow for nearly twenty years, ever since her twin boys were four years old. It was the long minority which had made Sir Adrian Belfield a rich man.

"And yet, mother, he must be more like you than my father," said Adrian, "for he and I are alike, and every one says that I am like you."

"In person, yes, he is more like me, I suppose," she answered thoughtfully; "but it is his character which is so like his father's: the same daring spirit—the same restless activity—the same strong will. He reminds me of poor Montagu every day of his life."

Sir Montagu Belfield had met his fate suddenly amidst the darkness of a snowstorm on the ice-bound slopes of Monte Rosa, while his young wife and two boys were waiting and watching for his return in a villa on Lago Maggiore. The horror of that sudden death, the awfulness of that parting, had left a lasting shadow upon Constance Belfield's existence, and had given a morbid tinge to a temperament that had always been hypersensitive. That first sudden sorrow had so impressed her mind that there was an ever-present apprehension of a second blow. She quailed before the iron hand of inexorable destiny, which seemed always raised to strike her. She had lived much alone, devoting her time and thoughts to the rearing and education of her sons; and her mind had fed upon itself in those long, quiet

years, unbroken by stirring events of any kind. She had read and thought much in those years; she had cultivated her taste for music and art, and was now a highly accomplished woman; but her studies and accomplishments had always occupied the second place in her life and in her mind. Her sons were paramount. When they were with her she thought of nothing but them. It was only in their absence that she consoled herself with the books or the music that she loved so well.

Her elder son, Adrian, resembled her closely in person and disposition. His tastes were her tastes, and it was hardly possible for sympathy and companionship between mother and son to be closer than theirs had been. Yet, dearly as she loved the son who had never in his life thwarted or offended her, there lurked in the secret depths of her heart a stronger and more intense affection for that other son, whose wayward spirit had been ever a source of trouble or terror. The perpetual flutter of anxiety, the alternations of hope and fear, joy and sorrow, in which his restless soul had kept her, had made the rebel only so much the dearer. She loved him better for every anxious hour, for every moment of rapture in his escape from some needless peril, some hazardous folly. Valentine was the perpetually straying sheep, over whose recovery there was endless rejoicing. It was in vain that his mother told herself that she had reason to be angry, and tried to harden her heart against the sinner. He had but to hold out his arms to her, laughing at her foolish love, and she was ready to sob out her joy upon his breast.

She went back to her chair by the fire, and sat there pale and still, picturing to herself all the horrors that can be brought about by an ungovernable horse. Adrian took up a newspaper and tried to read, listening all the time for the sound of hoofs in the avenue.

At last that sound was heard, faint in the distance, the rhythmical sound of a trotting horse. The mother started up and ran to the window, while Adrian went out to the broad, gravelled space in front of the porch to meet the prodigal.

He came up to the house quietly enough, dropped lightly from his horse, and greeted his brother with that all-conquering smile which made up for so many offences in the popular mind.

"Look at that brute, Adrian," he said, pointing his hunting-crop at the horse, which stood meekly, with head depressed and eye dull, reeking from crest to flank, and with blood stains about his mouth. "I don't think he'll give me quite so much trouble another time, but I can assure you he was a handful even for me. I never crossed such an inveterate puller, or such a pig-headed beast; but I believe he and I understand each other pretty well now. Yah, you brute!" with a sharp tug at the bridle.

"You might let him off without any more punishment to-night, I think, Val," said Adrian quietly; "he looks pretty well done."

"He is pretty well done; I can assure you I haven't spared him!"

"And you've bitted him severely enough for the most incorrigible Tartar."

"A bit of my own invention, my dear boy; a high port and a gag. I don't think he has had too easy a time of it."

"I cannot understand your pleasure in riding an ill-conditioned brute in order to school him into good manners by sheer cruelty," said Adrian, with undisguised disapproval. "I like to be on friendly terms with my horse."

"My dear Adrian, your doctors and nurses have conspired to molly-coddle you," answered Valentine contemptuously. "They have made you think like a girl, and they have made you ride like a girl. My chief delight in a horse is to get the better of the original sin that's in him. You may give him a warm drink, Stokes. He has earned it," he added, flinging the bridle to the groom, who had come from the stables at the sound of Mr. Belfield's return.

"Had you a good run?" asked Adrian, as they went into the house.

"Capital; and that beggar went in first-rate style when once he and I got to understand each other. We killed on Hagley Heath after a ripping half-hour over the grass."

"Come and tell mother all about it, Val."

"Has she been worrying herself about the chestnut? She was almost in tears this morning when she found I was going to ride him."

"She was getting a little uneasy just before you came home," answered Adrian lightly.

That scornful glance of his brother's eye wounded him to the quick. It implied a contemptuous acceptance of a too loving solicitude. It showed the temper of a spoiled child who takes all a mother's care as a matter of course, and has not one touch of gratitude or genuine responsive affection.

The two brothers went to the drawing-room side by side. Like and unlike. Yes, that was the description which best indicated the close resemblance and the marked difference between them. In the form of the head and face, in the outline of the features, they resembled each other as closely as ever twin brothers have done since Nature produced these human doublets; but in colouring and in expression the brothers were curiously unlike. The elder one had the pallid tints of ill-health, an almost waxen brow, hair of a pale auburn, features refined to attenuation, eyes of a dark violet, eyebrows delicately pencilled.

lashes long and drooping like those of a girl, lips of faintest carmine. It was only his intellectual power and innate manliness of feeling which redeemed Adrian's face from effeminacy; but mind was stronger than matter, and here the brave, calm spirit dominated the weakly frame.

Valentine was altogether differently constituted. His head, though shaped like Adrian's, was larger, broader at the base, and lower at the temples—a head in which animal propensities predominated. His complexion was of a dark olive, browned by exposure to all kinds of weather; his eyes were of deepest brown—splendid eyes considered from a purely physical standpoint, large, and full, and brilliant, with a wondrous capacity for expressing all the passions of which self-willed manhood is capable. Nose, mouth, and chin were formed in the same lines as in that other face, but each feature was larger and more boldly cut. The dark hair was thicker than Adrian's, coarser in texture. Hercules might have had just such a head of hair, bristling in short crisp curves about the low forehead. That likeness and yet unlikeness between the twins was a psychological wonder to contemplative observers and theorists of all kinds.

Lady Belfield came to meet her sons as they entered the room. It was only by the most strenuous effort at self-control that she suppressed all signs of emotion and laid her hand calmly on the sportsman's shoulder, looking at him with a happy smile.

"Well, Valentine, had you a good day on the chestnut?" she asked lightly.

"Splendid. That horse will make a first-rate hunter, in spite of you and Parker. Did you see him from the window as I brought him home?"

"Yes, I was watching you. I don't think he is quite up to your usual standard, Val. Hasn't he rather an ugly head?"

"That's just like a woman," exclaimed Valentine, with a disgusted air. "Her eye is always keen on prettiness, as if it were the Alpha and Omega. He hasn't a racer's head, if that's what you mean. He has a good serviceable head, that will bear a good deal of pulling about—rather a plain head, if you will have it. But a horse doesn't jump with his head, or gallop on his head, does he?"

"My dear Val, if you are satisfied with him——"

"Satisfied," cried Valentine, looking as black as thunder, "I tell you I am delighted with him. He is out and away the best hunter in the stables—beats that gingerbread piebald mare you gave me on my last birthday hollow."

"And yet I have heard people say the piebald is the prettiest horse in the county."

"There you go again—prettiness, all prettiness. The piebald was never well up to my weight—oh, she carries me fairly enough,

I know that—but she's over-weighted. You should have given her to Adrian"—with a sneer.

"Adrian can afford to buy his own horses," answered the mother, with an affectionate look at the elder born. "The only birthday gift he will take from me is a bunch of early violets."

"All your life is full of gifts to me, mother," said Adrian. "Whenever you're tired of Cinderella, I'll take her off your hands, Val."

"The deuce you will!" cried Valentine. "You'll find her a trifle too much for you. It's like the old saying about the goose, dear boy. She's too much for you and not enough for me. She wants work, Adrian, not gentle exercise. She was never meant for a lady's palfrey."

Adrian sighed as he turned away from his brother, and seated himself at Lady Belfield's tea-table, with had been furnished with due regard to a hungry hunting man, too impatient to wait for the eight o'clock dinner. That taunt of Valentine's stung him as such taunts—and they were frequent—always did sting. He keenly felt his shortcomings as a horseman and as an athlete. In all those manly accomplishments in which his brother excelled, fragile health had made Adrian a failure. The doctors had warned him that to ride hard would be to endanger his life. He might amble along the country lanes, nay, even enjoy a slow canter over down or common; might see a little hunting sometimes in an elderly gentleman's fashion, waiting about upon the crest of a hill to watch the hounds working in the hollow below, or jogging up and down beside the cover while they were drawing; but those dashing flights across country which so intoxicate the souls of men were not for him.

"You have a heart that will work for you very fairly to a good old age, Sir Adrian, if you will but use it kindly," said the physician, after careful auscultation, "but you must take no liberties with it. There are plenty of ways in which a man may enjoy the country without tearing across it at a mad gallop. There is fly-fishing, for instance. I am sure with that noble trout stream in your own park you must be fond of fly-fishing."

"I cannot imagine anything tamer than fly-fishing in one's own park," replied Adrian, with a touch of impatience. "Salmon-fishing in Scotland or in Norway——"

"Too fatiguing—too strenuous a form of pleasure for a man of your delicate constitution. A little trout-fishing in mild spring weather——"

"Merci. I must live without sport, Dr. Jason. After all, I have my library, and I have the good fortune to be fond of books, which my brother detests."

"I should have guessed as much," said Jason blandly; "Mr. Belfield has not the outlook of a reading man. He has that

hardy penetrating gaze which denotes the sportsman—straight, keen, business-like, rapid, yet steady. What a wonderful specimen of manhood. I think I never saw a finer young man—and so like you, Sir Adrian."

"Is it not something of a mockery to tell me that after you have sounded this narrow chest of mine?"

"Oh, there are constitutional divergencies. Nature has been kinder to your brother in the matter of thew and sinew; but the likeness between you is really remarkable, all the more remarkable perhaps on account of that constitutional difference. And I have no doubt there is a very close affection between you—that sympathetic bond which so often unites twin children."

"Yes, I am very fond of him," answered Adrian dreamily. "Fond of him, do I say?—it is more than mere fondness. I am a part of himself, feel with him in almost all things, am angry with him, sorry with him, glad with him; and yet there is antagonism. There is the misery of it. There are times when I could quarrel with him more desperately than with any other man upon earth; and yet I declare to you, doctor, he is as it were my second self."

"I can readily believe it, Sir Adrian. Who is there with whom we are so often inclined to quarrel as with ourselves? I know there is a damned bad fellow in me whom I should often like to kick."

Dr. Jason wound up with a boisterous laugh, and felt that he had earned the twenty-pound note which Sir Adrian slipped modestly into his comfortable palm. Joviality was the fashionable physician's particular line; and a case must be bad indeed in which he would not venture to be jovial. Were there but three weeks of life in a patient, Dr. Jason would take leave of him with a jocosity which was cheering enough to help the patient on a fourth week. And this case of Sir Adrian's offered no reason for dolefulness. A fragile body and a sensitive temperament, a life that might be prolonged to three score and ten, or might expire in a moment, in the very morning of youth, like the flame of a candle.

"Are you ever going to give me my tea, mother?" asked Valentine impatiently; "I am absolutely famishing."

"My dearest boy, everything is ready for you."

Valentine surveyed the low tea-table with a sweeping glance before he sat down, and then strolled across to the bell and rang violently. "Those stupid fellows always forget the cognac," he said, as he dropped into a chair. "I dare say if one of them came home after seven hours in the saddle, he'd want something stronger than tea."

"My dear Valentine, I am sure it is a very bad habit to

poison your tea with brandy," said Lady Belfield, with a distressed look.

"Spare me the customary sermon, mother. It is a much worse habit to lecture me every time I take a spoonful of brandy. It will end by my going straight to my dressing-room after hunting, where I can enjoy a stiff glass of grog with my feet on the hobs, and with nobody to preach temperance."

"You know I love to have you here, Val," said the mother, laying her delicate hand upon her son's roughened wrist, and looking at him with ineffable tenderness.

"So be it, and in that case don't let's have any teetotal sermons because of a homœopathic dose of cognac."

The footman brought a small decanter, and Mr. Belfield half filled his cup with cognac before his mother poured out the tea. The table was liberally furnished with varieties of cakes and muffins, anchovy sandwiches, and dainty little arrangements of *foie gras* in golden tinted rolls, which Mr. Belfield snapped up as if he had been a Newfoundland dog eating biscuits. His mother was delighted to see him in such good appetite, and sipped her tea with the serenest air, although the smell of the brandy in Valentine's reeking cup almost sickened her. These tea-drinkings after the hunt were her delight. To sit at her low table, with a son on each side of her, to linger long over the social meal, was the most delicious relaxation of her days. She asked no higher pleasure. Her evenings were often lonely, for Valentine hated sedentary occupation and intellectual dawdling of all kinds, and generally dragged his brother off to the billiard-room directly after dinner. If there were men visitors in the house for Valentine to play with, Adrian would sometimes stay in the drawing-room with his mother; but he was always at his brother's beck and call. The influence of the younger over the elder was supreme.

"I think we are like Jacob and Esau, and that my father must have willed upon his death-bed that the elder should serve the younger," said Adrian. "I can but fulfil my destiny."

The mother sighed and submitted, as she had always submitted, to Fate in the person of her sons. She had lived for them and in them so long that she had almost ceased to have individual desires or personal likings. Everything in house and stables and gardens and park and home-farm was regulated and governed by the inclinations of the brothers, albeit Lady Belfield was tenant for life in the mansion and its immediate surroundings. It happened somehow, almost imperceptibly, that in all things whereof she was mistress the inclinations of the younger son dominated those of the elder. Adrian was at once too weak and too proud to struggle against that overpowering influence.

"My dear mother, the place is yours. It is for you to decide,"

he would say, when Valentine had hotly maintained his own opinion with scornful depreciation of everybody else's ideas, treating architects, landscape-gardeners, and nurserymen as if Nature had stamped them so obviously as fools that it would be mere hypocrisy to treat them with the respect due to reason and good sense. "It is for you to decide, my dear mother," said Adrian, deserting in the heat of the battle; and the upshot was inevitable. Valentine had everything his own way.

How could two gentle, yielding natures stand firm against the force of an indomitable will and a boundless self-esteem? It was natural to Adrian to doubt his own judgment, to depreciate his own capacity; but Valentine had believed in himself from his cradle, had asserted himself to his wet nurse, and had reigned supreme ever since.

Happily for the household, from an æsthetic point of view, Mr. Belfield's taste was better than his temper; his judgment was sounder than his morality. If he erred, it was on the side of strength rather than weakness; he inclined to the brilliant and striking in all things, was in favour of large effects, bold lines, vivid colouring. There were those who shuddered at the first aspect of Mr. Belfield's billiard-room, with its scarlet draperies against black oak, its Japanese black and gold, its Rouen pottery and Neapolitan brass—there were those who declared that Mr. Belfield was the worst-dressed young man in London—but Royal Academicians had admired the arrangement of his den, and women liked his style of dress because it was picturesque.

"A picturesque man must be a cad," said Mr. Simper, who would have expired sooner than wear a hat with a brim the infinitesimal part of an inch wider or narrower than the Prince of Wales's, or a check that had not the stamp of equal authority. "A man who makes himself different from other men is not a gentleman. No gentleman ever courted observation."

It may be that Valentine Belfield rather defied than courted observation. He dressed to please himself, wore his hair long or short as his fancy prompted, would wear a low hat in Bond Street in the height of the season, and scowl upon observers with supreme contempt for their opinion. He had his clothes cut and fashioned as it pleased him, and had never been known to accept an opinion from his tailor—not even the West-end tailor's final argument, "I wear this pattern myself, sir."

A man with a taste and a temper of his own is generally admired and looked up to by other men. Mr. Belfield had been the centre of an aristocratic little circle at Trinity, his rooms the favourite resort of some of the best-born and wildest young men at the University. Needless to say that he had not worked, that he had missed chapel, and otherwise offended

against the laws of the college; that he had worn out the patience of college tutors and college coaches; and that, with a reputation for first-rate talents, he had contrived to place himself in the very lowest rank of students. Uninfluenced by the shades of the mighty dead—heedless of Bacon or Newton, Byron or Macaulay, Whewell or Thackeray—he had gone his idle way, drinking, rioting, gambling, carousing at unholy hours, insulting the authorities, flirting with barmaids, violating every rule and regulation of that venerable pile. He had disappointed his mother's ambition, and drawn heavily upon her purse. His return to Belfield Abbey was a signal for the commencement of a rain of Cambridge tradesmen's bills and lawyers' letters, which for the next twelve months steadily descended upon the house.

There were expostulations and explanations, tears from gentle Lady Belfield, sullen defiance from Valentine, generous interposition on the part of Adrian, and finally the Cambridge traders, with but a few egregious exceptions, were paid their demands in full, which was more than any of them deserved. Lady Belfield found half the money out of her private fortune, and Adrian insisted upon providing the other half.

His own career at Trinity had been curiously different from that of his brother. His weaker health had shut him out from all the pleasures of athleticism. He had been known neither as a hunting man nor a rowing man. He had never been heard of at Newmarket. He had read assiduously, and had taken honours. He had cultivated a few friends, but those were young men of studious habits like his own. He had lived so secluded a life that his presence in the college had only been known to the men of his own quadrangle and to the librarian, who saw him sitting in his own particular nook near Byron's statue on many a morning when other men were on the river or in the hunting-field.

For Adrian, Trinity had meant seclusion and earnest work; for Valentine, college life had been a long holiday, a riotous, reckless indulgence of youthful pleasure and youthful passions, a bad beginning for any life; and yet he had contrived amidst all his self-indulgence to leave Cambridge with the reputation of having been one of the most popular undergraduates in that great college of Trinity. He had flung away his money with a royal munificence, knowing that it was not his to fling. He had been good-natured after his fashion; he talked well, had a handsome face and commanding appearance, kept his rooms open to all the fast young men of his time, lent his horses freely till they went lame, and had a box of irreproachable cigars always open on his table. For one man who knew and liked Adrian there were twenty who affected to be warmly attached

to Valentine. What their friendship was worth, only the after-time could show. At present he was tolerably independent of all friendship outside Belfield Abbey.

He was six-and-twenty, and had been in love, or had fancied himself in love, twenty times. Indeed, he had professed to have outgrown the capacity for loving.

"Women are so monotonous," he said in one of those gushes of confidence with which he sometimes honoured his brother. He loved talking about himself, and Adrian was his most sympathetic listener. "Women are all alike. Upon my soul, Adrian, if you knew how little difference there is between the idiosyncrasies of a peeress and a barmaid, you would not wonder that a man who has had a few adventures soon begins to feel that love is played out."

"My dear Val, I don't think you know much about peeresses, and I hope you know next to nothing about barmaids," replied Adrian quietly.

It was on the evening after Valentine's first day on the chestnut. The brothers had retired to the billiard-room after dinner, and were sitting on each side of the wide old fireplace, too lazy to play, and luxuriating in the glow of the beech-logs and that kind of careless, easy-going conversation which has neither beginning, middle, nor end.

"My dear fellow, that shows how little you know about the other half of yourself. I have not reached my present age without an occasional flirtation with a peeress, and I have been passionately in love with a barmaid. The loveliest woman I ever met was a girl at an inn near Trumpington. What hogsheads of beer I have consumed as a sacrifice to her charms. Once I thought she loved me, and that I might have been wild enough to marry her. And now I am told she is singing patriotic songs, dressed as Britannia, at an East-end music hall."

"You know, Val, that a disreputable marriage would break your mother's heart."

"Don't I tell you the thing is off. I am not going to break anybody's heart—for the sake of that lovely deceiver on the Trumpington Road."

"But you are so reckless, so heedless of consequences."

"Because I live for myself, and for the enjoyment of the present hour," answered Valentine, in his deep strong voice, lying back in his low chair, and slowly puffing at a cigar.

How handsome he looked in that easy graceful attitude, the very embodiment of unblemished youth and physical power. It was but the highest type of sensual beauty—soul and mind went for but little in the well-cut face, the bold flashing glance; but yet there was some kind of charm that was not wholly

physical—some touch of brightness, mirth, and courage which attracted the regard of men, and won the love of women. The creature was not wholly clay, albeit flesh predominated over spirit.

"For what else should a man live but the present?" said Valentine, continuing the argument. "Who can count upon the future—who cares for the past?"

"Conscience and memory both care for the past."

"Conscience is a bugbear which the parsons have invented for us; and memory is a morbid habit of the mind which a healthy man should discourage. I have no memory."

"Oh, Valentine!"

"Well, I suppose if I were to sit down and try back I could remember most things that have happened to me since my cradle," answered his brother lightly; "but I never cultivate my memory. I make it a rule to ignore the past. Sally Withers, the Trumpington barmaid, jilted me. I blot her out of my existence. Lady Pimlico flirted with me—courted me, made a fool of me—and then deliberately dropped me. She is gone. Do you suppose I sit and brood over the summer days we spent together on his lordship's house-boat at Henley—when we sat in a corner under a Japanese umbrella, hiding ourselves—as much as ostriches are hidden—between two great Majolica tubs of palms and made ourselves conspicuously idiotic? Or that I ever dream of the nights at the opera, when we were alone together in her ladyship's box? No, Adrian. I make it my business to forget all such twaddle. Life is too short for memory of the past or forecast of the future. *Carpe diem*, dear boy. Gather your roses while you may. Be sure I mean to gather mine."

"Valentine, I verily believe you were created without a conscience."

"I was. You have the conscience, I the capacity for enjoyment. We are but two sides of one character."

CHAPTER II.

A WILD IRISH GIRL

A WEEK after that first day with the chestnut, Valentine Belfield had gone off to Paris at an hour's warning, to accompany a college friend who was going on to winter at Monte Carlo, with an infallible system which he and a mathematical friend had

invented two or three years before in their midnight reveries at Trinity. Valentine told his mother nothing about the system or the intended trip to Monte Carlo. He only told her that he felt hipped and wanted a change, and that as Touchwood was going to Paris he had decided on going with him and making a round of the theatres.

"The drainage is so dreadful in Paris; I am always afraid of fever," said Lady Belfield, looking intensely anxious.

"My dear mother, we shall go to the Bristol."

"And the hotels are so horribly high. They will be putting you on a fourth storey perhaps, and if there were a fire——"

"There never has been a fire at a good Continental hotel within my recollection," answered Valentine lightly. "Can't you suggest any other calamity, or any other peril—a cyclone, an earthquake, an insurrection, the fall of the Vendôme Column. I don't suppose they fastened it very securely when they put it up after the Commune."

"Dear Val, you always laugh at me."

"How can I help it, mother, when you give me such opportunities? There, kiss me, dearest, and good-bye. Lucas will have packed my portmanteau by this time. There's the dog-cart. *Je me sauve!*" And, with a hurried embrace, he ran off to the hall, his mother following to get the last look at him as he sprang into the cart, took the reins from the smart young groom, drove round the circular sweep, and spun into the avenue at a pace that threatened a catastrophe before he could reach the lodge.

He was gone, and Sir Adrian and his mother settled down into that placid and studious existence which suited them both so well. Lady Belfield divided her time between the newest books and the most classical music. She played Scarlatti and Bach. She read Browning and Herbert Spencer. She dawdled away an occasional hour in her flower gardens, which were lovely; she went the round of greenhouses and hothouses, and talked to her gardeners, who were numerous, and who all adored her. She moved among them as a queen whose approving smile is like a ray of winter sunshine. She went every day to the stables and petted Valentine's hunters, with whom she was on the most familiar terms. Even the new chestnut, although he set his ears back when she opened the door of his box, suffered her to go in and pat him, and accepted a lump of sugar from her palm, after sniffing at it suspiciously for a minute or so.

Life was full of interest for her without going beyond her own park gates; and then there were duty drives to be taken almost every day, and calls to be returned. There was a regular exchange and barter in the way of visiting to be maintained,

though Lady Belfield rarely accepted a dinner invitation, or adorned a ball by her graceful presence and her fine family diamonds. She went to friendly tea-drinkings and tennis parties, and so maintained local friendships. She liked a free-and-easy visiting, which did not oblige her to take off her bonnet or put on her diamonds. Genoa velvets and Mechlin flounces hung idle in her wardrobe. She liked to dine alone with her boys, in a tea-gown, and to read or play in the peaceful solitude of her drawing-room. Life taken at this gentle pace seemed never too long or too monotonous. She sighed for no change in an existence which realized all her wishes.

People wondered much that so pretty and attractive a woman should have escaped a second marriage. But to Lady Belfield a second marriage would have seemed a crime.

"I loved my husband, and I adore my sons," she said. "What room is there left for any other affection?"

"But you ought to marry, my dear," said her friend, Mrs. Freemantle, who was distinctly practical. "A husband would be immensely useful to you and those boys. He would look after your timber and your tenants, and would launch your sons—get them elected at the proper clubs, and all that kind of thing. He would be a steward without a salary."

Constance Belfield did not contemplate the matter from this common-sense point of view. Second marriage in the mother of a family she considered domestic treason. And when Valentine was troublesome, when the outside world deemed that a second husband, a man of strong will and clear brain, would have been invaluable to the lad's mother, Constance rejoiced that there was no one but herself to whom the sinner need be accountable, that she had the indisputable right of pardoning all his follies and paying all his debts.

The intervention of a hard-headed man of business at such times would have tortured her.

"My poor foolish boy," she said to herself, weeping in secret over the young man's delinquencies. "Thank God, there is no one to lecture him, no one to complain of him, no one to make him worse by hard measures."

She was not altogether foolish, although she erred on the side of soft-heartedness, and she knew that Valentine's career had up to this point been unsatisfactory; but she went on hoping that all would come right by-and-by; that these evil ways meant no more than the sowing of those wild oats which she had been told most young men were doomed to scatter before they sobered and settled into propriety.

Adrian was exceptionally steady. For him there were no wild oats to be sown. He had been his mother's comfort and mainstay from his very childhood; thoughtful, attentive,

devoted, her companion and counsellor when he was in Eton jackets. His nature seemed almost passionless. She never remembered to have seen him violently angry. She had never suspected him of being in love. He loved her, and he had an intense sympathy with his brother; but she doubted if his heart had ever gone forth beyond that narrow home circle. His tastes and inclinations in all respects resembled her own. He loved music, of which she was passionately fond, and he was no mean performer upon the organ and piano. He had his mother's subdued taste in colours, her scrupulous refinement and orderly habits.

And now they two, mother and son, were alone together by the hearth, in the long November evenings, while Valentine and his friend Touchwood went the round of the theatres in Paris, and danced at strange dancing places, and matured their scheme for breaking the bank at Monte Carlo.

"Mother, did you know that Morcomb was let?" asked Sir Adrian, as he scanned the county paper at breakfast one morning, a few days after Valentine's departure.

"What, at last? No, indeed, I have heard nothing about it."

"Then you have not been with any of your gossips for some time, I suppose. Here is the paragraph. 'Morcomb, Lord Lupton's fine old family mansion, has been recently let furnished to Colonel Deverill, of The Rock, near Kilrush, county Clare. Colonel Deverill is a keen sportsman, has been master of foxhounds in his own county, and will doubtless prove an acquisition to the neighbourhood.' Why, mother, how wonder-struck you look. Do you know anything about this Deverill?"

"A good deal, Adrian."

"Nothing unpleasant, I hope."

"No, dear; but it was just a little startling to hear that he had settled so near us. His father and my father were bosom friends, and Gerald Deverill and I used to see a good deal of each other when he was a young man about town, in one of the household regiments. I don't mind telling you that he wanted to marry me in those days, and as he was a wild, self-willed young fellow, he made himself extremely troublesome. I was very young, you see, Adrian, and I was almost afraid of him. And then your father came, and I knew I was safe. I think it was that sweet feeling of being protected by his love that first made me fond of him—and then—and then—ah, Adrian, how fond I was of him, and how good he was—only—only a little self-willed like your brother. But he was always good to me."

The tears came into her eyes as she thought of that brief wedded life, which had been all love, though it had not been all sunshine.

"This Deverill must be a disagreeable fellow," said Adrian. "I'm sure I shall dislike him."

"Oh, no, you won't, Adrian. He is not a bad man, by any means. He was very wild in those days, drank a good deal, I'm afraid, and was altogether in a bad way; but he married a year or two after my marriage, and sobered down, I was told. He has lived a good deal on the Continent of late years, and he and I have never met since your father's death."

"Whom did he marry?"

"Oh, a nobody, I believe—a girl with a little money, which he spent in a year or two. Her father was something in the City, a merchant or a broker, I think they said; and they lived in one of the new districts on the far-away side of Kensington Gardens. I have heard of them from time to time; but I have never seen him since his marriage, and I never saw his wife."

"She was not in your set, then."

"My dear Adrian, her people were in trade," answered Lady Belfield naïvely. "I suppose you ought to call on Colonel Deverill."

"I can hardly avoid it without being uncivil; but if you dislike the notion of seeing him here I won't call. He will understand, no doubt, why I don't."

"And he might think that I was afraid of meeting him. I would not have him suppose that for the world. No, Adrian, I should like you to call on him, just in the ordinary way. You can refer *en passant* to his early acquaintance with my family, not affecting to know that he was ever any more to me than a friend. And you will find out about his surroundings. His wife died some years ago; but I believe there are daughters. If they seem nice girls I might call on them. If not——"

"I may limit the matter to asking Colonel Deverill to a bachelor dinner—eh, mother?"

"I shouldn't like to be obliged to take up girls with Continental ideas and fast manners; and I fear these poor girls must have been sadly neglected."

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a judge of the species girl, but I'll give you as exact a report as I can, mother," answered Adrian gaily.

He was not in any hurry to set out upon his adventure. He still retained a good deal of his boyish shyness, and a visit to strangers was of all his social obligations the most obnoxious; so he let some pleasant, studiously idle days slip by before he found the weather good enough for a drive to Morcomb, and then he girded up his loins, looked out his least-damaged hat from the array of well-brushed felt and beaver in the hall, ordered his phaeton, and turned his face resolutely towards

Lord Lupton's park, which was a good five miles from Belfield Abbey.

The stable clock chimed the half-hour after two as he drove down the avenue. He would be at Morcomb at about three, which was the prescribed hour for ceremonial calls in that part of the world. Intimates might drop in at five and join in a friendly tea-drinking round a cosy little table; but for your visit of ceremony, patronage, or respect, three o'clock was the hour. Unsustained by luncheon, unrefreshed by tea, the visitor must face his host or hostess in the awfulness of an empty drawing-room, prepared to converse vivaciously about nothing particular for at least twenty minutes.

Morcomb Park was not particularly well kept. Park and home farm had been let to the local butcher for some years, and his cattle grazed within twenty yards of the drawing-room windows. There was an old-fashioned garden on one side of the house, and there was a spacious and lofty conservatory, which in Lord Lupton's prosperous days had been one of the glories of the neighbourhood; and all the rest was pasture, upon which Mr. Pollack's oxen and sheep fed and fattened. Gardens and conservatory had both been neglected since his lordship's chronic asthma had obliged him to winter at Nice, and the house had been either empty or in the occupation of strangers. Those village wiseacres who pretend to know a great deal more than their neighbours, declared that chronic asthma was only another name for impecuniosity, and that Lord Lupton turned his back upon Morcomb because he could not afford to live in his own country. Every one knew that poor Lady Lupton adored the place, and was never really happy anywhere else.

A succession of tenants had occupied Morcomb within the last ten years, and had been looked upon more or less coldly by the surrounding families. There is always a shade of suspicion in the rustic mind attaching to the people who occupy furnished mansions; an idea that if they were all that they ought to be they would have houses of their own. If they are rich the neighbourhood wonders where their money comes from. If they are foreigners the neighbourhood is sure they are not all they ought to be. Madame is a *ci-devant* opera-singer; Monsieur has a talent for card-sharping. If they are Americans, and scatter their money in the lavish Transatlantic style, opinion is against them from the outset. The only people who are kindly looked upon in this connection are those whose names and belongings are plainly set forth in Debrett, and who have houses of their own in other counties. To these are the arms of friendship opened.

Colonel Deverill was such a one. The Rock, Kilrush, was his ostensible dwelling-place; and, though his reputation was by no means untarnished, he was known to be a gentleman by

birth, and to have begun life in a crack regiment. The two facts, that he was an Irishman and had lived a good deal on the Continent, counted naturally in his disfavour, and the county looked upon him with a qualified approval.

The house was half a mile from the lodge, and a fairly kept drive wound along the base of a low hill, athwart undulating pasture land, dotted here and there with oaks and elms, and clusters of ancient hawthorns, and offered Sir Adrian a view of Mr. Pollack's beeves cropping the scanty sward of late autumn. On the crest of the hill stood the mansion, a classic villa about a hundred years old, much after the manner of the Club House at Hurlingham, with portico and pediment of white stone, and uniform rows of long French windows. A large bay window, broken out forty years before by an unæsthetic Lord Lupton, at the end of the south wing, was the only relief to that faultless uniformity.

There were no servants about. Sir Adrian's groom pulled a bell, which rang with startling loudness a long way off, pealing with a determined clamour as if it would never have done ringing. Sir Adrian alighted, ashamed of the noise he had caused to be made, flung the reins to his groom, and went up the steps. The hall doors were open, and a girl's voice cried, "Your shot, Leo," as he approached the threshold.

This was embarrassing, but the situation became even more involved when another voice exclaimed, "That bell means another county family come to stare and catechize. *Je m'esquive.*"

But before the speaker could escape, Adrian had crossed the threshold, and was standing, hat in hand, face to face with two young ladies, dressed as he had never seen girls dressed before, and both of them a great deal prettier than any girls his memory suggested to him by way of comparison.

"Miss Deverill, I think," he said to one of the damsels. "My name is Belfield, and I must apologize most humbly for bursting in upon you in this manner."

"Oh, but you could not possibly help it. If architects will plan houses with billiard-rooms on the doorsteps, the occupants must pay the penalty," answered the elder sister gaily. "We are very glad to see you, Sir Adrian. This is my sister, Miss Deverill, and I am Mrs. Baddeley. I am sorry my father is out this afternoon. He would have been charmed to make your acquaintance. He has talked tremendously about Lady Belfield, whom he had the pleasure of knowing quite intimately when they were both young. Will you come to the drawing-room, or shall we sit and talk here? Helen and I make this our den for the most part. You see we have no brothers to dispute the ground with us."

"I would much rather stay here," said Adrian.

Mrs. Baddeley had flung aside her cue while she was talking, and Miss Deverill, who had been sitting on the table when he first beheld her, was now standing beside it, flicking the chalk-marks off the cloth with her handkerchief. She was a tall, slim girl, in a sage-coloured velveteen gown, with a short waist and a broad yellow sash, and with her reddish auburn hair, which was superb in hue and texture and quantity, falling down her back in a rippling mass of light and shadow. Her gown was short enough to show a perfect instep and a slender ankle, set off by Cromwell shoes and yellow silk stockings. The married sister wore an olive plush tea gown over an Indian red petticoat, red shoes and stockings, and her hair, which was darker than Helen's, rolled up in a great untidy mass, and fastened with a red ribbon. The style and costume were altogether different from the regulation afternoon attire in this part of the world, which was generally severe—a tailor gown and a neat linen collar being the rule.

Had Sir Adrian seen this kind of picturesque toilette in Belfield Park, on the person of a plain girl, he would have regarded it with infinite disgust, for he had all the masculine love of neatness and subdued colouring: but both these women were so pretty, both were so graceful, with the easy grace of perfect self-assurance, that gracious air of women who are accustomed to be admired, approved, and made much of on all occasions, that, had they been clad in such calicoes as Manchester manufactures to meet the crude desires of the untutored African, he must have not the less admired them.

There was a large fire blazing in the wide grate, and there were three or four delightful armchairs (of draped and cushioned bamboo) about the hearth, and a scarlet Japanese table, suggestive of afternoon tea. Those chairs, with their vivid reds and yellows, and tassels and fringes, and Liberty silk handkerchiefs tied about them, had never belonged to Lord Lupton, whose furniture had all been bought in the reign of William the Fourth. Chairs and table were an importation of the Deverills, Adrian saw at a glance.

They all three sat down in front of the fireplace, while the outer doors were shut by the butler, who had come in a leisurely way to see if that loud pealing of the hall bell were a matter requiring his personal attention. He closed the double doors, put a fresh log on the fire, and discreetly retired.

"And now tell us all about Lady Belfield," said the married sister, perching her feet upon the old brass fender, and affording Adrian a full view of arched insteps and Louis heels. "Is she quite well, and is she as lovely as she was when she was young?"

"That might be saying too much—I mean about the loveliness," answered Adrian smiling; "but to my mind my mother is the prettiest woman of her age that I have ever seen. Of course a son is partial. As for health, well, yes, I think I may say she is quite well. Would you like her to drive over and see you?"

"Of course we should. We are dying to see her," said Helen, who was not at all shy. "If English etiquette were not written in blood, like the laws of Draco, we should have made father take us to Lady Belfield the day after we arrived here."

"You don't appreciate British conventionalities?"

"I detest everything British, present company of course excepted. We have always had such good times in France and Italy; and as for Switzerland, I feel as if I had been born there. I am longing to be at Vevey, or at one of those dear little villages on Lake Lucerne, now, when your horrid English winter is beginning. I can't think why father persisted in bringing us here. It is almost as bad as The Rock."

"You don't care for Ireland?"

"Does any one, do you think? If you knew Kilrush, you wouldn't ask such a question; but you don't, of course."

"I have not that privilege."

"Well, perhaps it is a privilege to have lived in the dullest, most out-of-the-way hole on the surface of this earth," retorted Miss Deverill lightly, flinging herself back in the Liberty chair, and showing rather more ankle and instep than the rival establishment on the other side of the hearth. "There is something exceptional in the fact, of course. But why, being obliged to live at The Rock occasionally for duty, my father should bring us to a remote Devonshire village for pleasure, is more than this feeble intellect of mine can grasp."

"I don't think there's much mystery about it," said Mrs. Baddeley. "In the first place, father is tired of wandering about the Continent; and in the second, my husband will be home on leave in December, and I must be in England to receive him. So my father very good-naturedly suggested a country place where Frank could stay with us and get a little huntin' and and shootin'. If Frank had been obliged to find his own quarters, the choice would have been between London lodgings or staying with his own people, both equally odious for *me*."

"Mr. Baddeley is in the army, I conclude."

"Yes; he is a major in the 17th Lancers, and has been in India for the last two years, and I'm afraid may have to go back there again after a winter in England."

"You return with him?"

"Unhappily, no," sighed the lady; "I cannot stand the climate. I tried India for a year, and it was something too

dreadful. I was reduced to a shadow, and I looked forty. Now, Helen, on your honour, didn't I look forty when I landed from Bombay?"

"You certainly looked very bad, dear," said Helen. "Do you think it would be too dreadful to offer Sir Adrian tea at a quarter to four," with a glance at a fine old eight-day clock. "Do you *ever* take tea, Sir Adrian?"

"A teapot is the favourite companion of my studious hours," answered Adrian. "May I ring the bell for you?"

"Yes, please; and you won't laugh at us and call us washerwomen for wanting tea so early?"

"I promise to do neither; but were my brother here I would not answer for him. He is very severe on my womanish passion for the teapot."

"Is he very different from you?"

"Altogether different."

"And yet you are twins. I thought twins were always alike."

"I believe we are alike in person, except that Valentine is handsomer, stronger, and bigger than I. But it is in tastes and character we are unlike. Yet perhaps, after all, it is mostly a question of health and physical energy. His robust constitution has made him incline to all athletic exercises and manly sports, while my poor health has made me rather womanish. I am obliged to obey the doctors, were it only to satisfy my mother."

"If Mr. Belfield is as nice as you are, I am sure we shall all like him," said Mrs. Baddeley frankly. "I hear he is abroad just now."

"Yes, he is in Paris, *en route* for the South; but I don't think he will be long away. He is very fond of hunting, and won't care to miss too much of it."

The leisurely butler brought in the tea-tray, and arranged it comfortably in front of Miss Deverill, who was allowed to enjoy all those privileges which involved the slightest exertion. Mrs. Baddeley was the very genius of idleness, and never picked up a pocket handkerchief, shut a door, or buttoned a boot for herself. She required to be waited upon and looked after like a baby. She attributed this lymphatic condition entirely to the twelve months she had spent in Bombay, which was supposed to have shattered her nerves and undermined her constitution. Helen, who had never been in India, was expected to write her sister's letters, pick up her handkerchief, and to find screens to protect her complexion from the fire, by which she sat at all times and seasons. Helen's maid was expected to wait upon her from morning to night, to the neglect of Helen's wardrobe.

So Helen poured out the tea, and they all nestled cosily round

the fire, with as intimate an air as if they had been friends from childhood. The two women chattered about their Continental life, their summers at Biarritz or Arcachon, their winters at Nice or at Vevey, and of those dreadful penitential periods of residence in Ireland. "Father is afraid of our being boycotted if he once gets the reputation of being an absentee," explained Helen, "so we make a point of spending three months of every year at Kilrush, and we pretend to be very fond of the peasantry on the estate. They really are nice, warm-hearted creatures: though I dare say they would shoot us on the slightest provocation. And father has a yacht on the Shannon, and altogether it is not half a bad life."

"Speak for yourself, Helen," said her sister peevishly; "you can bear solitude. I can't. I hope the people about here give decent parties," she added, turning to Adrian.

"They are not very energetic party-givers. A couple of balls within a radius of twenty miles and half-a-dozen dinners constitute a rather gay season."

"Good heavens, am I to exist all the winter upon two balls!" cried Mrs. Baddeley. "I shall forget how to waltz. My diamonds will go off colour from being shut up so long in their cases."

Sir Adrian wondered a little to hear an officer's wife talk of diamonds as if she had been a duchess, but he opined that Major Baddeley must be a man of substance. Certainly Colonel Deverill's daughter could hardly have been jewelled from the paternal resources, which every one knew to be meagre.

What a lovely woman she was, lolling back in her chair with the firelight shining on her hair and eyes—large hazel eyes. Every feature was charming, if not altogether faultless: the nose small and slightly *retroussé*, the mouth rather large, with full carmine lips and a bewitching smile; the chin beautifully rounded, the complexion of creamy whiteness. The younger sister was like her, only prettier, fresher, more girlish, eyes larger and more brilliant, hair brighter and more luxuriant, mouth smaller and of a more exquisite mould, nose less coquettish and more dignified, a face to dream about, a face to sing in Society verses, and glorify in fashionable photographs.

The clock struck five and startled Sir Adrian from his forgetfulness of all things but the two faces and the two voices, and the little glimpses of two hitherto unknown lives, revealed to him by that careless prattle. He rose at once.

"I must really apologize for the length of my first visit," he said.

"You wouldn't if you knew how dull we are, and how anxious we were to see you and Lady Belfield. I hope she will come soon," said the elder sister.

"She shall come to-morrow," answered Adrian.

"Oh, that is too good of you. Please bring her to lunch. My father will be charmed."

"I'm afraid to engage her for lunch. I know that in a general way she dislikes going out so early. Afternoon tea is her passion."

"Then bring her to afternoon tea. She shall not discover us in the hall as you did. She shall find us in the drawing-room behaving properly."

Adrian was glad to hear this. He had an idea that the vision of two girls playing billiards with open doors, and that exclamation, "Your shot," would have disparaged the young ladies in his mother's estimation. He also hoped that Helen would have her hair less carelessly displayed to-morrow afternoon.

"She shall certainly come to-morrow, unless there is something extraordinary to prevent her," he said, "and in that case I'll send you a note, Mrs. Baddeley."

"You will not put us to the trouble of being proper for nothing. That is very kind of you. Good-bye."

She rang for Donovan, the butler, who appeared five minutes afterwards, just as Sir Adrian was disappearing. The sisters went with their visitor to the door, which he opened for himself. They went out into the windy afternoon with him, and patted and admired his horses, which had waited in the cold much longer than they were accustomed to wait. The two girls stood in the portico and watched him drive away, and waved white hands to him as to an old friend.

Scarcely had he driven out of sight of them when his heart began to fail him as to that promise which he had made about his mother. He had been eager to pledge her to friendship with these strangers; and now he began to ask himself whether these two young women, lovely as they were, would not appear intolerable in her eyes. His mother was the essence of refinement; and these girls, though assuredly charming, were not refined. They had a free and easy air which would jar upon a woman whose secluded life had kept her unacquainted with the newest developments in Society and manners. Young women who wore their hair *au naturel*, and showed their ankles freely, were an unknown race to Lady Belfield; nor was she familiar with the type of young woman who is thoroughly at home with strangers of the opposite sex the minute after introduction. Lady Belfield's manners had been formed in the quiet and reserved school. She had never played billiards, or been interested in racing, or gambled in a Kursaal, or enjoyed any one of those amusements which Society smiles upon now-a-days. She had been an only daughter and an heiress, brought up very strictly, permitted few amusements, and only a chosen circle of friends; knowing not

Hurlingham or Ascot, Goodwood or Baden; oscillating between a dull house in London and a duller house in the country; working at her piano conscientiously under a fashionable German master, cultivating her mind by the perusal of all the best books of the day, attending all the best operas and concerts, dancing at half-a-score of aristocratic balls in the season, and knowing as little of the world as an intelligent child of ten.

"I am afraid she'll hardly like them as much as I do," thought Adrian innocently. "They are so frank, so friendly, so full of life, and so different from all the girls we have met round about here. I wonder what the father is like?"

And then he recalled his feelings as he drove along this road two hours ago, and remembered with what a suspicious mind he had thought of Colonel Deverill, inclined to suspect that gentleman of the most Machiavellian motives for planting himself within easy reach of Belfield Abbey. Had he not come to Morcomb with the secret intention of renewing his old suit to Lady Belfield, of trying to win her for his spoil now that she was a wealthy widow, her own mistress, not too old to marry again, free to marry whom she chose? Yes, he had been inclined to suspect the Colonel of hidden views in this direction; and yet had he any such scheme it was strange that he should not have set about the business ten years ago, since he had been quite eleven years a widower. That such a scheme should be an afterthought would be strange.

And now, in his homeward drive, Adrian was assured that Colonel Deverill had come to the neighbourhood in all innocence of mind, in his happy-go-lucky Irish way, glad to get a cheap house in a picturesque country.

CHAPTER III.

DANGER

Lady Belfield consented to fulfil the engagement which her son had made for her, but she owned that her dear Adrian had been somewhat precipitate.

"To call two days running seems rather too eager," she said, "and if we find by-and-by that Colonel Deverill has degenerated, and that the girls are *not* nice, it will be difficult to draw back. To go to them twice in a week implies such an ardour of friendship."

Adrian blushed.

"I think you will like them," he said, with a troubled air.

"You have told me so little about them after being with them so long. What did they talk about all the time?"

"The places where they had lived, mostly. You see we had no common friends to pull to pieces. Mrs. Baddeley seemed horrified when I told her what a limited amount of gaiety she is likely to get in this part of the country."

"Then she is evidently fond of pleasure."

"I'm afraid she is. However, her husband is expected home next month, and no doubt he will keep her in the right path."

"And the unmarried sister; what is she like?"

"Very like Mrs. Baddeley, only prettier."

"My dear Adrian, you talk of nothing but their beauty. I'm afraid they must be empty-headed girls."

"They are not blue-stockings. They did not quote Huxley or Sir John Lubbock, did not make a single inquiry about the geology of the neighbourhood or our antiquarian remains. I believe they are the kind of women who think that ruined abbeys were invented for pic-nics, and who only consider a geological stratum in its adaptability to the growth of roses or strawberries. They are very handsome, and I think they are very nice. But you will be able to judge for yourself in ten minutes."

This dialogue took place in Lady Belfield's barouche, on the way to Morcomb.

They were approaching Mr. Pollack's demesne, and a little flock of Mr. Pollack's sheep had just passed them in a cloud of dust on their way to the slaughter-house, a sight that always afflicted Lady Belfield, so tender was her love of all four-footed beasts, from the petted fox-terrier in her drawing-room to the half-starved horse on the common.

The carriage drove up to the Corinthian portico, and before the horses stopped Colonel Deverill was out upon the steps to welcome his old love. He handed her out of her carriage, and escorted her into the house. He was a handsome-looking man, with grey hair and black moustache and eyebrows, a man whom strangers generally spoke of as "striking."

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am for this early visit, Lady Belfield," he said. "I was so anxious for my girls to know you. They have had such a wandering life, poor children. I have so few friends, except in that miserable country of mine, where, of course, everybody knows them. And this is your son?" shaking hands with him as he spoke; "my girls told me how well they got on with you yesterday, Sir Adrian. Brazen-faced hussies, I'm afraid you found them."

Again Adrian blushed, so strangely did the paternal phrase jar upon his ear.

"They are not at all like the ordinary run of young ladies," said Deverill. "I have brought them up in the true spirit of *camaraderie*, and I always think of them as jolly good fellows."

Lady Belfield looked horrified. She accompanied her host through an ante-room to the long drawing-room, speechless with wonder that any father should so speak of his daughters.

Two fair and graceful forms rose from before the hearth, and Adrian breathed more freely. No flowing tresses to-day, and a far less liberal display of ankles. Mrs. Baddeley wore a fashionable tailor gown and a high collar, and her hair was dressed to perfection.

Helen was in soft, grey cashmere, with a falling collar of old lace, and long tight sleeves, which set off the beautiful arms and slender white hands. She was still æsthetic, but she was tidy, and her little bronze slippers only played at bo-peep under the long limp skirt, as she came forward to welcome Lady Belfield.

Her beauty was indisputable; her smile would have fascinated an anchorite. She received Lady Belfield with caressing sweetness, almost ignoring Adrian, to whom she only gave the tips of her taper fingers. She seated herself on a low sofa by her guest, and asked leave to loosen her mantle.

"You will take it off, won't you? You are not going to pay us a flying visit. Father, take Lady Belfield's mantle directly, or she will be suffocated in this warm room."

Between them they removed her ladyship's cloak, and made her comfortable upon the sofa, with a hassock for her feet, and a little table for her teacup.

"Now, you look homelike and friendly," said Helen, seating herself on a low ottoman, so as to be in a manner at the visitor's feet.

Colonel Deverill looked on with a pleased air.

"I hope you won't object to our being very fond of you," pleaded Helen. "You are not the least like a stranger to us, Lady Belfield. Father has talked so much of your girlish days and his young-mannish days, when all the world was so much better than it is now, and when even an Irish estate was worth something. How hard it is for us young people to be born into such a bad used-up world, isn't it? To be created at the fag-end of everything!"

The girl almost took Constance Belfield's breath away. She was so easy, so spontaneous, and her caressing manner had such an air of reality. Adrian's mother had come in fear and doubt, rather inclined to dislike Colonel Deverill's daughters, who were only beautiful; and this one was wheedling herself into the warm motherly heart already.

"And so you have not forgotten the old days in Eaton Square, when your father and my father were such friends," she said to the Colonel at last, feeling that she must say something. "It is very pleasant to find you have made your daughter like me in advance."

"I have not forgotten a single detail of that time," replied Deverill. "It was just the one golden period of my life, before I had found out what care means. So long as I was a pensioner on my father everything went well with me; if I got into difficulties the dear old boy always got me out of them. There was a growl, perhaps, and then I was forgiven. But when he died, and I was my own master, with a rich wife, too, as people told me, the floodgates of extravagance were opened, and the stream was too strong for me. I thought there must be a lot of spending in our two fortunes, and I took things easily. When I pulled up at last, there was deuced little left, only just enough for us to get along with in a very humble way. We have had to cut and contrive, I can tell you, Lady Belfield. This girl of mine doesn't know what it is to have a gown from a fashionable milliner; and I have left off cigars for the last six years. I only keep a box or two on the premises for my friends."

"A case of real distress," sighed Mrs. Baddeley, with a tragi-comical air; "we contrive to be very happy in spite of the wolf at the door, don't we, father? It is an Irish gentleman's normal state to be ruined. Now, Helen, go and pour out the tea, and let me sit by Lady Belfield."

Helen went to the table, which Donovan had just set out. There was no other servant in attendance. This slow and faithful Hibernian seemed to comprise the indoor staff.

"And are these all your family?" asked Constance, looking at the sisters.

"These are all I have in the world, and one of these will be deserting me, I suppose, if her husband can contrive to stay in England," answered Colonel Deverill.

"Which I hope he may be able to do, poor fellow," said Mrs. Baddeley, with a more careless air than Lady Belfield quite approved in a wife's mention of an absent husband.

Adrian handed the tea-cups and muffins, and when those duties were performed slipped into a seat beside Helen, and they two talked confidentially, while Mrs. Baddeley and her father and Lady Belfield carried on an animated conversation, chiefly about the neighbourhood and its little ways.

Sir Adrian was questioning the young lady for the most part, trying to find out what manner of girl she was, so that he might be the better able to meet a second attack from his mother.

Did she hunt? Yes, and she adored hunting; it was just the one thing in life worth living for.

"But I think you are fond of yachting, too," suggested Adrian. "You talked of yachting yesterday."

"I revel in a yacht. Yes, when there's no hunting, yachting is just the one thing I live for. When father had a two-hundred-ton yacht cruising about the Mediterranean my life was ecstasy."

"Then you are a good sailor?"

"If that means never being ill I am a very good sailor. But I go a little further than that, for I know something about navigating a yacht. I should not be in the least afraid of finding myself at sea without a skipper."

"These are out-of-door accomplishments," said Adrian; "no doubt you have equal gifts for winter and wet weather. You are musical, of course."

"*Comme ci comme ça.* I can play a valse or accompany a song."

"Your own songs, for instance."

"My own, or yours, if you sing."

"Alas, no; I am not vocal, though I do a little in the way of instrumental music. But you—I like to know all your talents. You paint, perhaps—flowers."

"Heaven forbid! Do I look the kind of girl to devote a week to the study of a carnation in a glass of water, not a bit like when it's done? or to a hedge-sparrow's nest and a bunch of primroses? No, I never have used a brush; but I sometimes indulge in a little caricaturing with a quill pen and an inkpot. But how very egotistically I am prosing. Tell me about yourself, please, Sir Adrian, since we are to be friends as well as neighbours. What are your particular vanities—tennis, shooting, fishing? I hear you don't hunt."

"No, I don't hunt; I do a little fly-fishing in the season, and I shoot a few pheasants every October; just to keep pace with the neighbourhood. I am not a sportsman, Miss Deverill. Books and music are my only vanities."

"I adore books," said Helen, smiling at him; "they furnish a room so sweetly. If I were rich enough I would have mine all in vellum, with different coloured labels."

"You are a connoisseur of bindings, I see."

"Oh, I like everything to look pretty. It is the torment of my life that I am not surrounded with beautiful things. In our nomadic existence it is impossible to have one's own atmosphere Two or three Liberty chairs and a little Venetian glass won't make home in a wilderness. I hope some day I shall have a perfect house of my own and heaps of money."

Lady Belfield rose. The visit had lasted nearly three-quarters of an hour, not so long as Adrian's yesterday.

"You will come and see me soon, I hope," she said to Mrs. Baddeley.

"I am dying to see the Abbey. I am told it is too lovely."

"It is a dear, good old place, and we are all fond of it. I heard you talking of books, Miss Deverill. I know Adrian will be pleased to show you his library."

"I shall be delighted to see it—and the stables," answered Helen. "I have heard so much of the stables. And I want to see Mr. Belfield's hunters."

"I am sorry he is not at home to show them to you. He is very proud of them."

"Oh, but it will be fun to get acquainted with them in his absence; and when he comes back it will seem as if I had gone half-way towards knowing him," said Helen laughingly.

She and her sister went with Lady Belfield to the portico, and hung about her as she got into her carriage. These caressing Irish ways were new to Constance Belfield, but she yielded to the fascination of two fair faces and two fresh young voices, full of music.

"I don't know that they are altogether good style, Adrian," she said, as they drove home, "but they are very sweet."

Adrian agreed as to their sweetness, but not as to their deficiency in style.

"I don't believe in any hard and fast rules for a woman's manners," he said, rather irritably. "I don't recognize that conventional standard by which every woman must speak and look and move in exactly the same fashion. I think Mrs. Baddeley and her sister are simply charming in their unstudied frankness and warm-hearted enthusiasm. How really pleased they were to see you."

"They seemed very cordial; yet, as I was quite a stranger to them——"

"Oh, but you were not a stranger. They had talked of you and thought of you, and elevated you into a kind of ideal friend. Their hearts went out to you at once."

"They are very charming; but when I meet with girls of that kind I am always reminded of Tot, the fox-terrier."

"As how, mother?"

"She is such a darling thing, and if she sees me in the garden or the stableyard, she rushes to me and leaps up at me in an ecstasy of affection; but I have seen her behave just the same five minutes afterwards to the butcher. It seems an exuberance of love that runs over anyhow."

"Rather hard upon Helen Deverill to compare her with a fox-terrier!" said Adrian.

Helen Deverill! How familiar seemed the sound of her name

to him already! Helen Deverill! and he had known her only four-and-twenty hours.

"You'll ask them over soon, I suppose, mother?"

"If you like, dear.'

"To dinner?"

"That means a party."

"Oh, no, pray don't have a party. The Vicar, perhaps, and the Freemantles—just three or four friendly people. One sees so little of one's friends at a set dinner. They would like to meet Freemantle and his wife, I dare say."

"And we could ask Jack Freemantle, as there are girls."

"Yes, I suppose we must ask Jack. He is an oaf, but the kind of oaf who always gets on with girls."

"He sings, Adrian."

"Did I not say that he was an oaf, mother? In my estimation, a man who sings ranks almost as low as the man who plays the flute."

"And yet I thought you were fond of music."

"Music, yes; but not amateur singing and playing. It is because I love music that I hate the young man who carries a roll of songs when he goes out to dinner, and the young woman who can sit down in cold blood to murder Beethoven."

The mother smiled and then sighed. Her son was all that was dear to her; but she had the feeling that a good many mothers and fathers must needs experience now-a-days, that the young men and women of this present generation are trained too fine.

The invitation to a friendly dinner, at three days' notice, was sent next morning. Adrian reminded his mother of the letter at least three times before it was written, and despatched by a mounted messenger. Posts in the country are so slow, and there was always a hunter to be exercised.

Sir Adrian walked across the fields to Chirwell Grange, and invited Mr. and Mrs. Freemantle, whose house was just three-quarters of a mile from the Abbey, as the crow flies. Mrs. Freemantle was his mother's most intimate friend in the parish, a sturdy, practical woman, who affected nothing better than common sense, but excelled in the exercise of that admirable quality. Her well-to-do neighbours, for the most part, disliked her. She was too keen and outspoken for them; but the poor and the sick adored her. She had known the brothers from their cradles, and treated them as cavalierly as she treated her own Jack, future Squire of Chirwell, or her daughter Lucy, a tall slip of a girl, who scarcely seemed to have a mind of her own, so overshadowed was she by her strong-minded mother.

"You must all come," said Adrian to this kindly matron,

who stood bareheaded in the cold, clipping the dead leaves off a favourite shrub in a thicket that bounded her lawn. "I am sure you will like them."

"Them," echoed Mrs. Freemantle. "Then there are more than Colonel Deverill? You only spoke of him just now."

"There are his daughters—two daughters."

"Oh, there are daughters, are there? Is that the reason you are so eager to launch this new man? I thought you generally held yourself aloof from girls, Adrian. I know you have been very tiresome whenever I have wanted you here to play tennis."

"I am not particularly inclined to girlish society in a general way, perhaps. But these ladies are—well, a little out of the common."

Mrs. Freemantle gave a *sotto voce* whistle.

"I see," she said. "They are the new style of girls, fast and furious; just the kind of girls I should not like my Lucy to know. They would corrupt her in a week. She would begin to think of nothing but her frocks, and consider herself a martyr because she lives in the country eleven months in every twelve. God forbid that she should ever get intimate with such girls. Irish too! I believe that after five-and-twenty they generally drink."

"Don't you think it would be as well to see them before you condemn them?" said Adrian, who was used to Mrs. Freemantle's little ways, and not prone to take offence at her speech.

"I am not condemning them. I am only preparing myself for the worse. Yes, of course we will dine with you, if Lady Belfield wants us. We are free for Saturday, I know."

"You'll all come."

Mrs. Freemantle pursed up her lips in another suppressed whistle.

"Four would be too many. Jack and the father and I will come. That will be more than enough of us."

"You are afraid to trust Lucy among my Hibernians. I don't think the ladies have taken to whisky yet. One of them is married, by-the-by—her husband expected home from Bombay shortly."

"A grass widow," exclaimed Mrs. Freemantle; "worse and worse. I feel sure they are a disreputable set, and your eagerness to insinuate them into society is a mistaken benevolence. And you would make me your catspaw. I am to be the thin end of the wedge."

"I don't believe Colonel Deverill or his daughters care a straw about your stuck-up rural society; only they are bright, clever people, and I want to see something of them myself."

"Take care, Adrian. What if this Irish Colonel wants to be your step-father?"

"He will never realize his wish. I can trust my mother's discretion, and her love for her sons."

"My dear Adrian, nine people out of ten would say your mother acted wisely in marrying again, if she were to make a suitable match. Your brother Valentine is not the easiest young man to manage——"

"Do you think a step-father would make him more manageable, Mrs. Freemantle? I wonder you can talk such nonsense," exclaimed Adrian, getting angry.

"My dear boy, I don't know what to think about step-fathers and second marriages; but I think your mother has a troublesome handful with her younger son."

"He is a very good fellow, and he is very fond of his mother."

"Fond of her, after his own fashion, yes—a dutiful son, no. Well, Adrian, every back has to carry its burden; may your mother's rest lightly. You are the person who can best lighten it for her. She has at least one devoted son. There, there, you look angry and you look distressed. My foolish tongue has been running on too fast. I promise to be in my most agreeable mode on Saturday evening, and I'll try to admire Colonel Deverill's daughters. What is the married lady's name?"

"Baddeley."

"What? We have some Baddeleys among our family connections. I dare say we shall find out that Mrs. Baddeley's husband is a kind of cousin. The world is so absurdly small."

From Chirwell Adrian walked to the Vicarage, and in the dusty old library, where the worthy Vicar had taught him his rudiments twelve years ago, discovered that luminary nodding over his Jeremy Taylor, exactly in the same attitude and, as it seemed to his old pupil, in the same suit of clothes which had marked him in those earlier years. It was a tradition in Chadford that the Vicar never read any other book than those mottled-calf-bound volumes of the great divine, and that he had never been known in his sermons to quote any other authority, yet produced his name ever with an air of novelty, as one who introduced a new light to his congregation.

He looked up smilingly as Adrian entered unannounced, having been always free to go in as one of the family since his days of pupilage.

"My dear boy, I haven't seen you for an age," said the Vicar, holding out his thin right hand, while his left still clasped his book. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Making some new acquaintances, Vicar; and I want you to come and meet them next Saturday evening."

And then Adrian entered once again upon a graphic description of Colonel Deverill and his daughters, finding a more sympathetic listener in the Vicar than he had found in Mrs. Freemantle.

Reginald Rockstone was a man of peculiar delicacy of feeling, not deeply learned but exquisitely critical, knowing a few authors well, worshipping a few poets with all his mind and all his heart, and seeing all things from their most spiritual standpoint.

"It must be sad for these young women to be motherless, and with a wild Irish father," he said gently; "and the married girl—she is little more than a girl, I take it—sad for her to be separated from her husband."

"She is just now expecting him home," said Adrian, "and she seems in excellent spirits."

The Vicar was a bachelor, and his own master in all things. The living was not one of the plums of the Church, but the income was ample for a man whose tastes were of the simplest and who had some means of his own. He was a man of excellent family, a gentleman to the core of his heart. His poor parishioners adored him; his friends among the country people tolerated him as a harmless eccentric. The small professional people, village doctor, market-town solicitors, considered him reserved and supercilious. He refused all invitations to dinner from this class, though he would take a cup of afternoon tea with their wives now and then, to show them he bore no malice.

"Why should I dine out unless it be to dine more pleasantly than I can at home?" he argued, when he talked over his parish and his idiosyncrasies with his intimate friend Lady Belfield. "My evening by the fireside or in my garden is always precious to me. I have the books I love for my companions, and their company never palls. At my age a man's leisure evenings are numbered. He cannot garner them too carefully. Why should I go out to sit an hour and a half at a gaudily arranged dinner table, surrounded by petty formalities, in an atmosphere of roast mutton, and among people who look as if their evening dress was a kind of armour, to hear the smallest of small talk, to struggle with irrepressible yawns, to endure all the agonies of casual attendance from a sham butler. When I come here—or to houses like this—my body basks in a luxury that I am sybarite enough to appreciate; while my mind expands and soars in unison with minds that think only noble thoughts. Here we talk of books and of spiritual things; in the village or the town the talk is of politics or persons—hovers between Gladstone's last speech and the latest scandal about the Board of Guardians."

To Belfield Abbey, therefore, the Vicar went whenever he was bidden. Lady Belfield's low voice and sympathetic manner had

a peculiar charm for him. So far as that great tender heart of his had ever gone out to a woman, it had gone out to her years ago, in the early days of her widowhood, when she came home to the Abbey with her two boys—a stricken mourner, deeming her sorrow above all sorrows. He—a grave man of seven and thirty, old for his years—had comforted and advised her, had helped her in the bringing up of her sons, and had prepared them for Eton and coached them for Oxford. He, who had never on any other occasion sacrificed that golden leisure which he prized so highly—the leisure to read old books and muse and dream over them—had for Lady Belfield's sake toiled at the very elements of classical education, at declensions and conjugations, at Cornelius Nepos and Livy. In Adrian he had found a pupil after his own heart, and at five-and-twenty Adrian was still his pupil, still delighting to read a Greek play with him, proud to discuss a tough passage in Plato or Aristotle; or to talk about Horace and his little ways, as if they both had known him intimately.

With Valentine education had been a tougher job. Clever, idle, arrogant, self-opinionated; from a very early stage always convinced that he knew more, or understood better, than his master: to teach him had been like hewing shapely stones out of the hardest rock. The material was there, could one but quarry it; but the labour was ungrateful, and often seemed hopeless. The pupil never wanted to learn what the master wished to teach him. When the good Vicar opened the "Æneid," the boy cried, "A fig for classics," and was hot upon reading "Don Quixote" in the original, angry with his master because he would not turn from the beaten path of duty to teach him Spanish.

"You are a good Spanish scholar; my mother told me so when she was sounding your praises," said Valentine; "why won't you teach me Spanish?"

"Because you are very backward with your Latin. Stick to that, Val, and it will help you with Spanish by-and-by."

"I sha'n't care about Spanish by-and-by. I want to learn it now."

This was a sample of many such arguments. The lad was obstinate and wrong-headed, but the Vicar never gave way to his whims; and this may have been the reason that Valentine liked Mr. Rockstone better than any one else at Chadford.

But with advancing manhood Valentine exhibited characteristics which filled his mother's loyal friend with apprehension. He was uneasy when the young man was at the Abbey. He was more uneasy when he was away; dreading lest every day should bring some evil tidings to the mother. He, who had studied Lady Belfield's thoughts and inclinations as closely as

only one who fondly loves can study a character, knew that to the mother's heart the wayward son was the more precious.

"She loves them both," he told himself; "she loves Adrian exactly as a good mother should love a good son; but she loves the other one foolishly, blindly, sinfully—if, indeed, it be a sin to make an idol of poor humanity."

Ten minutes to eight on Saturday evening, and the Vicar was luxuriating in the glow of a splendid fire, in a drawing-room full of light and colour, the perfume of hothouse flowers, and the litter of new books and periodicals. Lady Belfield sat in her favourite chair by the hearth, with her eye on the door. A kind of instinct told her that the Morcomb party would be late. Adrian hovered about near the door, with a slightly nervous air.

"That dear young man looks as if he expected to be arrested," said Mr. Rockstone; and then went on questioning Lady Belfield about the last book she had been reading. He used to say that he had no occasion to read new books on his own account: Lady Belfield always kept him *au courant*.

"An intelligent woman's synopsis of a shallow book is always better than the book itself," said the Vicar.

Mr. and Mrs. Freemantle and their son Jack were announced as the clock struck eight. With the Freemantle family there was always a military exactitude. They were all well drilled. Even Lucy had never been late for a lesson or a church service in her life.

Mrs. Freemantle shook hands with Lady Belfield and looked round for the strangers. Mr. Freemantle was an excellent man, with plenty of common sense but no cultivation, and very little memory. He never opened a book, and he rarely listened to conversation, unless it had some direct bearing upon field sports, politics, in which he was faintly interested, or his own affairs. He had utterly forgotten that he had been asked to meet anybody in particular, and when it came to a quarter-past eight and there was no announcement of dinner, he began to wonder whether Lady Belfield had changed her cook.

Lady Belfield and her friend talked of the parish, the sick and poor, whom they saw almost daily, the Vicar joining in now and then. Adrian still lingered near the door, and made believe to be entertained by Jack Freemantle's account of a football match which had come off with *éclat* to Jack's side that afternoon.

"We gave those fellows a tremendous licking: I had only just time to get home and dress," said Jack, who had the newly-washed look of a man who had dressed in a desperate hurry.

"Your friends are very late, Adrian," said his mother presently. "Do you think we ought to wait any longer?"

"My dear mother, their first visit! Of course we must wait. I know you'll forgive us, Mrs. Freemantle."

"I forgive you with all my heart, Adrian; but the Vicar and my husband have both been looking at the clock every five minutes, and I am afraid they are beginning to feel rather vindictive towards these friends of yours."

"Are you really expecting any one?" asked Freemantle innocently. "I thought it was your cook that was behind time."

"Lady Belfield's servants are never unpunctual, John. Didn't I tell you we were to meet Colonel Deverill?"

"Deverill! Ah, to be sure, the man who has taken Morcomb. I used to see him in London five-and-twenty years ago. He was in the Guards—a South of Ireland man."

The timepiece chimed the half-hour, and the door was flung open.

"Colonel Deverill and Miss Deverill, Mrs. Baddeley."

The matron led the way, lovely, smiling, deliciously unconscious of blame, svelte, graceful, in a tight-fitting ruby velvet gown, and with only one ornament—a large diamond pendant, which a duchess might not have disdained to wear. Helen followed, clad in some limp, creamy fabric, with neither jewels nor gold, only a cluster of white lilies on her shoulder. If this was an æsthetic toilet, æstheticism was very becoming to Miss Deverill.

No one apologized for being late. The Morcomb party slipped into their places in the easiest manner. Mr. Freemantle was told off to the younger sister, the Vicar was assigned to Mrs. Freemantle, and Sir Adrian took Mrs. Baddeley. His mother had told him that it must be so; and Jack followed his hostess and the Colonel as if he had been an aide-de-camp.

The dinner was much livelier than rural dinners are wont to be. Helen sat between the Vicar and Mr. Freemantle, and prattled delightfully to both. The sisters were full of talk and laughter, gayer and more spontaneous than any girls Adrian had ever met. They played into each other's hands, held each other up to ridicule, bandied jokes with the airiest touch—flew from subject to subject with inexhaustible vivacity; and yet their voices never grew loud or harsh, their conversation never degenerated into noise and clatter. To Adrian the evening passed as if by enchantment. It was nearly midnight when the Deverill carriage drove away. He and the sisters had pledged themselves to all manner of engagements. He was to go over to tea next day, and to inspect their stud. He, who never hunted, was to be at the meet on Monday, and was to potter about a little, and show them the country.

"Adrian," remonstrated his mother, whose quick ear caught

that mention of hunting, "you know Dr. Jason said you must not hunt."

"He said I mustn't ride across country, mother. He never forbade my jogging about the lanes on a steady cob."

"He has had delicate health from his childhood," said Lady Belfield to Mrs. Baddeley, with an apologetic air. "I may be forgiven if I am over-careful of him."

Adrian escorted the ladies to their carriage.

"What do you think of them, Sophy?" asked Constance Belfield of her friend, while her son was out of the room. Mr. Freemantle and the Vicar were talking politics, Jack was yawning in a corner, exhausted after having shouted all his best songs—"If doughty deeds my lady please," and "The Stirrup Cup," and "Old London Bridge."

"What I think of them may be summed up in one word—DANGEROUS."

"Oh, Sophy!"

"For Adrian, most decidedly dangerous. Indeed, I believe the mischief is as good as done already. But perhaps you would not object to his marrying Miss Deverill."

"My dear Sophy, she is a perfect stranger to me. How could I approve?"

"Well, you will have to approve—or to disapprove very strongly."

"I can see that Adrian admires Miss Deverill; but there is no reason to conclude he must needs be in love with her."

"Reason! Fiddlesticks! I tell you he *is* in love with her. When did reason and love ever go together! When a young man has been bottled up for the best part of his life in a village, his heart is as inflammable as a haystack after a dry summer."

And with this unpoetical comparison, Mrs. Freemantle drew her Canton crape shawl round her shoulders, ordered her husband and son off with a nod, bade her friend "Good-night," and sailed out of the room.

CHAPTER IV.

ACROSS COUNTRY

MRS. FREEMANTLE was right in her diagnosis.

Adrian was in love. He was not altogether unconscious of his own condition; but like most intellectual young men he

fancied himself much wiser than he really was. He thought that he only admired Helen Deverill; and he told himself that he would go no further than admiration until he knew a great deal more of the lady. He was his own master, free to marry whomsoever he chose. A penniless girl of good family seemed to him the most proper person for him to marry; but he told himself that he must have the highest qualities in a wife. She must not be beautiful alone; mentally and morally she must be perfect. He was not to be scared by a little unconventionality; he admired a girl who dared to think and act for herself, and whose manners were not modelled upon the manners of all other girls; but he meant to study the lady's character before he suffered his heart to go out to her—never suspecting, poor fool, that his heart was already hers, and that he who aspired to be her judge was in reality her slave.

He had never ridden to hounds since he was a boy; for from the hour he found hard riding was perilous, or even impossible for him, he had turned his back upon the sport, and had tried to persuade himself that he did not care for it. Yet now he was out every hunting day, dawdling at the meet, jogging up and down the lanes, watching and waiting about, as much in the day's sport as it was possible for him to be without going fast over pasture or common and taking his fences with the rest of the field. Whenever there was a bit of slow-going he was at Helen's side. When the hounds were in full cry she was off after them, while he waited patiently in a sheltered corner, hoping fate and the fox might bring her back that way.

She seemed to like his society; but she was full of caprices and uncertainties, wayward, wilful, a coquette to the marrow of her bones, only Adrian did not so judge her. He thought her a versatile creature, a being of whim and fancy, disinterested, uncalculating, innocent as a wood or water nymph, but full of tricks and changes like the nymphs. That she was a clever, keen-witted young woman, who meant to make a good match, knew the value of her own beauty to an iota, and intended to enjoy all that is best and pleasantest in this brief, swift race across the earth's surface, which we call life—this he suspected not. He saw only graces and charms and frank unconscious loveliness of person and of mind in every look and word and action. To him she appeared faultless; and yet he thought that he was over-critical, that he erred on the side of deliberation and severe judgment.

Some days, when the fox was what Helen called "a ringing brute," and the run scarce worth serious consideration, she would spend the whole day in Sir Adrian's company, utterly indifferent to the scandal such companionship might occasion. She had been accustomed to be talked about ever since she was

fifteen, and would have fancied her attractiveness on the wane if people—womenkind especially—had ceased to say hard things of her. She had her sister for chaperon, but then Mrs. Baddeley always had her own affairs to look after. She was a splendid horsewoman, and rode in a business-like way which admitted of no favour to that little court of admirers which she always had in her wake. Her admirers must be in the first flight if they wanted to see anything of her. For those who rode as boldly and as fast as she did, she had ever the sweetest smiles and the kindest words; and the long ride home with two or three of these, after the kill, was like a procession of lovers.

"Launcelot and Guinevere!" exclaimed Miss Toffstaff, one of the county Dianas; "the way those two young women go on is too astounding. I never saw anything worse in the Row: and *that*," added Miss Toffstaff significantly, "is saying a great deal."

There were three Miss Toffstaffs, who rode to hounds, and who rode well, and were always well mounted. They prided themselves in turning out in perfect style, and had their habits, hats, and boots from the best maker, be he who he might. Fashion is very capricious in its treatment of habit-makers. There is always a new man coming to the front, with advanced theories upon the cutting of the knee; so the Miss Toffstaffs changed their habit-maker about once a year.

Mr. Toffstaff was a new man in that part of Devonshire, who had lately acquired the estate of a deceased native. Needless to say that he was more "county" than the county people whose ancestors had been owners of the soil ever since the Heptarchy, subscribed much more liberally to the hunt, and gave himself more airs than the men of the *vielle roche*.

In opposition to, and yet in friendly relations with, the three Miss Toffstaffs, were the two Miss Treduceys, whose father, Sir Nathaniel Treducey, of The Moat, was of an older family, and owned more aristocratic connections than any other man in the neighbourhood. His mother came of a ducal race in Scotland, and his wife was the daughter of a French marquis, who had fallen in love with the handsome young diplomatist at one of the Empress's balls in the golden days of the Second Empire.

The Miss Treduceys had been, as it were, born on horseback, and looked down from a prodigious altitude upon the Miss Toffstaffs, whom they suspected of having been taught by a riding-master. They were fair, rather pretty girls, with large liquid blue eyes, and they were as thin as their mother was fat. Their aquiline noses and slender figures were an inheritance from Sir Nathaniel, who belonged to an eagle-nosed race, and had the air of a gentlemanlike bird of prey.

The Miss Toffstaffs and the Miss Treduceys rarely agreed

about any one subject, albeit they were such very good friends; but they were unanimous in their condemnation of Colonel Deverill's daughters.

"It makes one feel ashamed of being a girl, don't it?" asked Matilda Treducey of Marjorie Toffstaff.

The Miss Treduceys had been christened Matilda and Isabel, in honour of their Norman descent; the Miss Toffstaffs were Dorothy, Marjorie, and Jessie, having been christened at a period when quaint rustic names were in fashion. Mrs. Toffstaff was a woman who followed fashion assiduously, and as she never thought of anything else, sometimes overtook it. Everything at Wilmington—the dinner-table, the drawing-room, the stables, and the gardens—was in the newest style. A fashion could hardly be heard of in Devonshire before it was to be seen at Wilmington. At The Moat, on the contrary, everything was of the old school, a curious and rather pleasant mingling of old French and old English fashions. Lady Treducey protested her abhorrence of all innovations, and boasted of her husband's poverty as if it were a distinction in an age when parvenus are egregiously rich.

"Since France has been a Republic everything new has been detestable," she said, "and England is very little better than a Republic. All our fashions have an American taint. I look forward with horror to a day when London and Paris will be only suburbs of New York."

The five young ladies were all agreed as to one fact—that Colonel Deverill's daughters were a disgrace to the neighbourhood; but as Lady Belfield knew them, and in a manner vouched for their abstract respectability, every one called at Morcomb, and the objectionable ladies had been bidden to luncheons and afternoon teas.

Matrons and maids owned that the new-comers were pretty, but were unanimous in denouncing them as bad style. The word had been passed round, as it were. They were to be called upon and tolerated; but they were not to be admitted to the inner sanctuary of friendship.

They were received, however; that was the main point. Sir Adrian met them everywhere. His life was a new life, full of new interests. He wrote long letters to his brother, filled with descriptions of Helen, her looks, her sweet little ways, her sparkling conversation, which lost a good deal of its sparkle when reduced to pen and ink.

"I did not not think it was in you to be such a fool," wrote Valentine, with brotherly candour; "the girl is evidently setting her cap at you. She has not a sixpence, and you are one of the best matches in Devonshire. However, of course you will please yourself. There is no reason why you should try to

please anybody else. I, who have only my mother's fortune to depend upon, must marry money, if I ever marry at all. To my own mind at present my state is the more gracious as a bachelor."

CHAPTER V.

AS THE SPARKS FLY UPWARD

THOUGH he was much of a student and more of a dreamer, Mr. Rockstone was a true friend, helper, and counsellor to the poor of his parish. It was a sadly ignorant parish, such as one might expect to light upon could some magician's wand reverse the glass of time and take us back a century to the days of Farmer George and Snuffy Charlotte. Reading and writing were rarest accomplishments among those of mature years, and, in spite of schools and schoolmasters, the youthful mind was in a state of darkness which made a simple game of dominoes in the Vicar's reading-room seem as mysterious and perplexing as an inscription on a Babylonian brick.

Often in the long winter evenings would Mr. Rockstone tear himself away from his own comfortable fireside to go down to the little reading-room, where he would labour with sublime patience at the mystery of dominoes, or the perplexity of "Muggins" or "Slap Jack," two games at cards, by which he tried to enliven the dulness of a purely literary evening. Here, too, he would read aloud, and enlighten the rustic mind by a leader in the *Standard* or the *Post*, and would listen good-naturedly to the rustic ideas as to the last political crisis. Nor did the Vicar confine his ministrations to the vicinity of vicarage, church, and schools. His sympathies extended to the furthest limits of an extensive parish.

The Deverills had been settled at Morcomb for nearly a month, and it was the first week in December, when Mr. Rockstone set out one mild, sunny morning for a leisurely ride to Wymperley Marsh, which was at the extreme edge of Chadford parish. The soft west wind and blue sky suggested April rather than mid-winter, and the Vicar felt it a privilege to exist as he trotted along a Devonshire lane on his steady-going old horse, Don—so called because he was as stupid and as lazy as some of the college dons Mr. Rockstone had known in his youth.

The Vicar loved Don, and Don loved the Vicar, would recognize his master's voice afar off in the garden, and appeal to him

from his stable with loud neighings. Don had carried the Vicar over every acre of his capacious parish, and knew every cottage at which he was accustomed to stop and every turn in the lanes which led to his own stable. Horse and rider had a gentle tussle now and then when Don wanted to go home—which was the normal condition of his mind—and when the Vicar wanted to go further afield. But this morning Don was as fresh and as ready for his work as it was in his nature to be at any time, and he got over the ground rather quicker than usual.

The River Chad is one of the most picturesque streams in England, but even the Chad has its bits of commonplace; and it is never less romantic than in that broad reach which is bounded on one side by Wymperley Marsh, and on the other by low level meadows, where the cattle wade breast deep in the rank sedgy grass.

The marsh sustains nothing but wild-fowl, and can only be crossed at one point by horse or foot passenger, who has to pick his way along a rough stone causeway, which was constructed in the dim remoteness of an unrecorded past, and which it is nobody's business to improve or repair in the present.

Few but sportsmen intent on water-fowl would have tempted the dangers of this dilapidated causeway; but Mr. Rockstone knew every stone of it. A solitary hut, which stood close to the river, with water on one side and marsh on the other, was the *ultima thule* of his parish; and here he came about a dozen times in the year to see two of his parishioners, who had awakened in him a keener interest than their merits might be said to deserve.

Yonder hovel, with low cob walls and a gable roof of blackened reeds, had been tenanted for the last forty years by a basket-maker, whose gipsy wife had died soon after his establishment in that solitary abode, and had left him with a daughter of three years old. The child had grown up with him somehow, as the birds grow in their nests, in that lonely place, without womanly help of any kind, and she had grown into a creature of a strange wild beauty, in which her gipsy blood was manifest. She had grown almost to womanhood when Mr. Rockstone came to the parish, and he had been interested in her as a curious growth of savage ignorance in the very midst of civilization. She had grown up knowing hardly anything which civilized young women know; but she had on the other hand the innocence of ignorance, had no more knowledge of the outer world, its pleasures, temptations, and sins, than she had of the great shining worlds in that unfathomable universe above her head. She could neither read nor write; she could not count her own ten fingers without breaking down two or three times in the attempt; and she had never been inside a church since she was

christened. Her father's excuse when charged with his sins of omission was, that he was a very poor man, and that he lived four miles and a half away from everything.

"How could I send her to school?" he asked.

"You might have moved to a more civilized home," said the Vicar.

"Moved! Why, this cottage is my own freehold, Parson. I'd as soon part with my right arm as sell the house that shelters me. I should never get another if once I sold this. The money would all go in drink."

"You might at least go to church once a week," pursued the Vicar. "You wander many a mile in the week to sell your baskets. Could you not walk a few miles on a Sunday to save your soul?"

John Dawley shook his head.

"When a man has been on the tramp all the week he wants his rest on Sunday," he said.

The Vicar talked to Madge Dawley—tried to teach her the elements of Christianity; but the task was difficult. He could not ask her to walk nine miles a day in quest of enlightenment. He rode over to the cottage by the marsh as often as he could, and he took more pains with this beautiful young ignoramus than with anybody in his parish. After he had been engaged thus for about a year, he began to think he had shed some rays of light upon the dimness of the girl's mind. Intelligence seemed to be awakening. Madge was less childish in her remarks upon the Gospel, and more inquisitive about the world in which she lived. Mr. Rockstone was full of hope about her, when she disappeared suddenly from the cottage, the marsh, and parish of Chadford, without leaving the slightest clue to the mode and motive of her departure. All that her father could tell the parson was that he had left the hovel at daybreak to carry his baskets to a remote market town, where there was a fair; and on coming back at midnight he had found the house empty.

Had he ever seen a strange man lurking about the cottage? Did he suspect his daughter of any acquaintance with a person who might lure her away?

No, to both questions.

Mr. Rockstone took infinite pains to trace the fugitive, but in vain; she had not been seen in the village, nor at the nearest railway station. The local police could do nothing, the metropolitan police were equally at fault. John Dawley's daughter was but another vanished drop in the great ocean of humanity.

Five years afterwards, the basket-maker, returning towards midnight from the same market town and the same annual fair, upon the anniversary of his daughter's flight, found a child, apparently between two and three years old, sitting on his

hearth staring at the fire, which had been lighted not long before by unknown hands.

He had no occasion to puzzle his brains about the child's identity, for she was the exact reproduction of his daughter's infancy, and she wore round her neck the yellow glass necklace which Madge had worn from infancy to womanhood, her mother's favourite ornament, without which she had never considered herself dressed for the day.

He searched the hovel, thinking to find his daughter in hiding somewhere, but the place was empty save for that young thing squatting before the fire. He questioned the child, but she was backward in her speech, and could only express her own wants in a very infantine fashion: Maggie tired, Maggie hungry, Maggie want milk. She did not cry for her mother, or make any objection to her changed surroundings. She ate her supper of dry bread contentedly; but she refused to sit upon the basket-maker's knee. She curled herself up like a kitten upon the bed where he put her, and slept as peacefully as a kitten sleeps.

The basket-maker took to his new burden with a stolidity which might be either resignation or indifference. He would have brought up the granddaughter exactly as he had brought up the daughter; but here the Vicar interfered. He arranged that the child should be boarded for two weeks out of every four in the house of a respectable cottager at Chadford. During that fortnight the girl was to attend the school, and be taught and cared for as a Christian child in a Christian country. The second fortnight in each month she lived with her grandfather; and as soon as her baby fingers were capable of work she began to help him in his basket-making. Her friend the cottager taught her domestic work of all kinds, and trained her to usefulness in the earliest age. She was able to keep the hovel in order from the time she was eight years old. Her board was paid for by the Vicar, who asked no one's help in this good work. When she was eleven years old the cottager's wife died, and Madge, who was able to read and write and cipher, now took up her abode permanently in the cottage on the marsh, and was only expected to appear at Sunday-school and church on fine Sundays.

Sometimes she tramped about the countryside with her grandfather, selling baskets. At other times she spent her solitary days in the cottage, or in the little cottage garden, a quarter of an acre redeemed laboriously from the marsh, a paradise of flaunting wallflowers, stocks, and nasturtiums, hollyhocks and sunflowers, with patches of potatoes and cabbage, and a tall screen of scarlet-runners, bright against blue river and blue sky in the hot summer afternoons, when Madge sat on a little mound at the edge of the stream, basket-weaving, and watching the lazy tide flow by, her fingers moving with a monotonous regular

motion as if she had been weaving a net to catch the souls of men.

She was beautiful enough for an enchantress, with those great dark eyes and raven hair, a skin like old ivory, and features of Roman mould. The Vicar was mortal, and he could not help feeling a deeper interest in the soul that dwelt within this splendid form than in his snub-nosed, apple-cheeked villagers. And then the girl was shy or proud, and held herself aloof from all sympathy, which made the Vicar only the more sympathetic.

Mr. Rockstone had deferred his visit to old Dawley's cottage longer than usual, and he approached the marsh to-day with a certain anxiety of mind, inasmuch as Madge had not appeared in her usual place in the gallery of his church for more than a month. The weather had been either bad or doubtful on all those Sundays, and he had taken that to be the cause of her absence; yet when a fifth Sunday came and she was still absent, the Vicar began to think there must be some more serious reason than rain or wind.

The smoke rose in a thin, white column from the low chimney of the hut, and a gleam of firelight showed in the window that looked across the marsh. There was some life in the hovel at any rate.

Old Dawley was sitting by the hearth, which occupied one side of the low, dark living-room, making a basket; his granddaughter knelt by the window with her arms folded upon the sill, looking out across the broad, level marsh to the road on the edge of the low hill which shut out all the world beyond. The marsh was about a quarter of a mile in width, broken up here and there into pools, where the wild fowl congregated; a long stretch of waste land and dark water very dear to the sportsman.

The girl turned her head with a listless air as the Vicar entered; but she did not rise from her knees or offer him any greeting.

"How d'ye do, Dawley? how's the rheumatism? No better, eh?" as the old basket-maker shook his head. "That's bad. The weather has been against us old fellows for the last three months. But I didn't think the weather was bad enough to keep a healthy young woman like you from church, Madge," added the Vicar, with good-humoured remonstrance, smiling at the girl, whose great dark eyes were looking at him dreamily, as if she were but half-conscious of external things, in the absorption of her own thoughts.

"She ain't over-healthy now," said her grandfather discontentedly. "I don't know what be come over her. She's just as if she was half asleep all day, yet she's awake almost all

night, for I hear her toss about t'other side the lath and plaster, and sigh as if she'd a mort o' trouble, half the night through. She spiles my rest, she do, as well as her own. She's the most discontentedest young female as ever I met with."

"Come, come, friend, you musn't be hard upon her. It may be that the life is too lonely for her, and that she's not well. Young women most of them seem subject to neuralgia now-a-days. They all seem to want tonics, quinine and iron, sea air, and change of scene. What's the matter, Madge?" asked the Vicar gently, laying his broad fatherly hand upon the raven hair.

"Nothing's the matter," the girl answered, with a sullen air; "I am sick of my life, that's all."

"You are tired of this lonely place. You want to leave your poor old grandfather?"

"No, I should be no better anywhere else. It isn't the place I'm tired of, it's my life."

"This is a case for quinine; I'll send you a box of pills," said the Vicar cheerily.

Madge turned her back upon him and looked out at the marsh, just as she had been looking when her patron entered. The old man got up from his three-legged stool, and jerked his head significantly towards the door.

"Come out and have a talk, Dawley," said the Vicar; "your cottage is too warm for me, and I've got Don outside to look after."

Don was browsing contentedly upon some rank grass on the edge of the causeway, and had no more intention of going away than if he had been the original antediluvian horse in a museum.

The two men went out together, and strolled along the causeway side by side.

"Of course you can see what it is, can't you, Parson?" began Dawley abruptly. "No mistaking the signs in a gal."

"You think she's in love," hazarded the Vicar.

"O' course she is, Parson. That's the way it allus begins—sighin' and sulkin', and sleepless nights a-thinking of *him*. Curse him, whoever he is! He'll lure this one away like the other one was lured away, of a sudden, without a word of warning to the poor old father. I dursen't leave the cottage, lest I should find it empty when I comes back. I hain't sold a basket for a fortnight. I'm here to guard her from the sarpent."

"Who can it be?" asked the Vicar, with a puzzled air. "Is there any one in the village that she cares for?"

"Lord! no, Parson. It ain't no one in the village—it ain't a working man, or a gentleman's servant, or any one of her own station—else it would be all fair and above-board, and she wouldn't be afraid to tell her old grandfather. It's somebody

whose love means ruin. Some lying, fine gentleman, who'll speak her fair, and tempt her to go away with him, and leave her to rot when his fancy's over. I knows the breed."

"Have you any reason to suspect mischief?"

"Too many reasons; but I'll tell you one or two, and you can judge. It's just about six weeks ago that I noticed when I came home late at night that there was a smell of 'baccy in the room yonder. Well, I'm a smoker myself, but this wasn't my 'baccy that I smelt, and it wasn't twelve hours old, neither. It was a gentleman's 'baccy; as different from what I smoke as the champagne you gentry drink is from the cider they sell up street. I know'd there'd been a stranger here when I smelt that 'baccy. I asked my gal if there'd been any one come to the cottage all day. She said 'No,' but I could see she was lying. I noticed the same smell three nights running; and on the morning after the third night I found another sign o' mischief. There'd been rain the day before, but the wind shifted towards evening, and there was a sharp frost in the night; and when I went out into the causeway there was my gentleman's footprints, as if they'd been cut in a rock—the prints of a gentleman's strong-soled shooting boots. There's no mistakin' the cut of a fine gentleman's boot: it's as different from a poor man's clodhopper as a gentleman's 'baccy is from mine. Somebody had been hanging about the cottage and making up to my gal."

"Was that all? Did you never see the man himself?"

"Never. He was too artful. I've scarcely been three days away from home since I saw the footprints in the causeway; but my gentleman has never shown up hereabouts, and my gal has moped all the time."

"Have you never questioned her since then?"

"Now and again, careless like. Had there been any one shooting the wild fowl, anybody going past in a boat? and such like. But I might as well expect to get answers out of a stone. Not a word would she say to me except she didn't know, she hadn't noticed—what reason was there for her to watch for people in boats?"

"Well, Dawley, we must be on our guard for her, poor child. She is too handsome to be exempt from dangers and temptations. I don't think she ought to be left to live this solitary life any longer. Solitude encourages brooding. She wants change and occupation—the sight of strange faces."

"How is she to get them?" asked Dawley despondingly.

"She might go into service."

"And be ruined and broken-hearted before she had left me six months. I know what servant gals are, and how little care there is taken of 'em. She's not old enough or wise enough to be left to take care of herself. Send her out to service anywhere here-

abouts, and the fine gentleman who left his footmarks on this causeway would soon find out where she was, and be after her. She'd have her evenings out, belike; and he'd be waiting for her somewheres in the dusk. I knows the world, Parson. She don't, poor child; and knowledge of the world ain't to be learnt second-hand. I might preach her sermons as long as my arm, but she'd never be warned by them."

"There is service and service, Dawley. I know of houses in which the maids are as well looked after as nuns in a convent. I'll talk to a lady I know about your granddaughter, and if I can interest her——"

"It will be hard to part with her," said the old man; "but I can't keep watch over her always and sell my baskets; and if I don't sell 'em we must starve. And she's gettin' to hate me for being so watchful of her, I can see that. It's a wicked world, Parson."

"It's a troublesome world, my friend, and we must make the best of it for ourselves and each other. Man was born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. Have you heard anything of Madge's mother lately?"

"Not a word, Parson. Ah, she was a bad lot, an out-and-out bad lot, with a heart as hard as the nethermost millstone!"

"You must not judge her, Dawley. She was brought up in darkness and ignorance. No one ever taught her her duty."

"There's duties that don't need to be taught—the duty of loving your father and mother. That ought to come natural even to a savage."

"Your daughter may have died years ago."

"I don't think so, Parson. I heard of her six or seven years ago—not a word from her, mark you—but I heard from a man who had seen her in London, riding in her carriage; or in somebody's carriage, as bold as brass—as fine a lady as any in London, Joe Tronnion said. He's a gipsy hawker, sells brooms and baskets and such like, and travels all over the country. He saw my gal, he did, not seven year agone, all among the gentle folks on Hepsom Downs, dressed in silk and satin, as brazen as you like, she that never came to look after her child since the little one was three year old."

"Well, we had best forget all about her, Dawley, till God puts better thoughts into her mind and brings her back to us. I'll see what can be done about Madge. She wouldn't suit everybody, never having been in service—but I think I know a lady who will help me."

"In this or in any other emergency," he said to himself, by way of postscript.

He mounted Don, and rode slowly homeward across the open

waste to the lane with its tall tangled hedges, bare now for the most part, save where the foliage lingered on the pollard oaks, and the beechwood showed copper-coloured leaves that were to last till late into the coming year, when the young growth came to drive them away. Very slow was that homeward ride, for Don had exhausted all his freshness in the outward journey, and only quickened his pace when he saw the old church tower and smelt the clover in the Vicarage stable. But to his astonishment the Vicar took him past that familiar gate, and trotted him, snorting with indignant protest, to the gates of Belfield Park and along the avenue to the Abbey, where there was some consolation, as a groom came out at the sound of hoofs, and conducted the clerical steed to a loose box, while his master went into the house to see Lady Belfield.

She was in her usual place in the innermost drawing-room, a woman always ready to see her friends, and give them cordial welcome; not one of those women who have to be hunted for on the arrival of a visitor, and who are never fit to be seen except when they are *en grande tenue*.

She gave her hand to the Vicar with a smile, and he sat down in the luxurious chair at her side, and felt that life was worth living for.

He told her the state of things at old Dawley's cottage: the young life wasting, the young, undisciplined heart pining, for want of womanly care and sympathy, and he had enlisted her feelings before his story was half finished.

"You want change of scene for her, a brighter, busier life, a home where she will be taught and cared for," she said, when she had heard all. "Let her come here by all means. My housekeeper is an excellent creature—but you know my good Mrs. Marrable as well as I do."

"I have reason to know her. Yes, she has a heart of gold."

"Well, I will place this *protégée* of yours under Mrs. Marrable's especial care, and I will do all I can for her myself."

"You are always good, Lady Belfield. You have taught me to rely upon your goodness. But I must warn you that this girl may be of very little use in your establishment. She is untaught and inexperienced."

"I don't expect her to be of use to me; I want to be of use to her. Bring her to me as soon as you like, Vicar."

"God bless you. I will bring her to you to-morrow, if I can."

CHAPTER VI.

EASY TO LOVE HER

The Vicar rode Don across the marsh early next morning, a liberty which that sage animal felt inclined to resent, so rarely was he taken far afield two days running. But the Vicar was too intent upon humanity just now to spare horseflesh.

Old Dawley had gone to the market-town with a load of baskets, his exchequer having sunk to the lowest point, dire necessity forcing him to abandon his post as guardian of a girl's heart and honour.

Madge was alone, in the same moody attitude, with the same moody countenance which the Vicar had observed yesterday. She took but the slightest notice of his entrance—scarcely stirred from her place by the window, scarcely ceased from her contemplation of the marsh, only looked at him with a bored expression and muttered a sullen good morning.

"Madge, I have got you a place," he said, without circumlocution.

"What place?"

"A place in a lady's house, where you will be kindly treated and taught to be useful. I am going to take you to a new and cheerful life, to a good home, clean rooms, wholesome food, and companions of your own age."

"You mean that I'm to go into service," she said, with the same sullen air.

"Yes, my dear girl; the life you are leading here is altogether an unnatural life. It is high time you went out to service, and learnt to get your own living."

The girl was silent for some moments, looking across the marsh with that dreamy air of hers; then she turned slowly and looked at the Vicar, half in wonder, half in scorn, with large dark eyes that were capable of looking unfathomable things.

"Did my grandfather put that in your head?" she asked.

"No. Your grandfather told me only that you were unhappy. It was I thought of the cure."

"A pretty cure!" she cried contemptuously. "You think it will make me happy to scrub floors and pots and pans, or perhaps you would send me out as a nursemaid to mind squalling babies. I would rather starve and have my freedom than be a well-fed slave."

"There is no such thing as slavery in the house where I am

going to take you. Lady Belfield is one of the kindest women I know. She will take you into her service as a favour to me, and she will have you treated kindly and taught to be useful."

"Lady Belfield!" cried Madge, jumping up and flushing to the roots of her hair; "Lady Belfield will take *me* into her service!"

"Yes, Madge, and will interest herself in your welfare. She has heard of your dismal life here, and has promised to do all in her power to make you happy. You won't refuse such a service as that, will you?"

"No," answered the girl, after a long pause. "I won't refuse. I ought to be very grateful, I suppose. It's a fine thing for dirt like me to be let into such a house as that."

"It will be the making of you, Madge," answered the Vicar gravely, "and I hope you accept the situation in a right spirit, and will try to do your duty to that excellent lady."

The girl vouchsafed him no assurance as to her intention upon this point.

"When am I to go?" she asked.

"At once—to-day."

"I have hardly any clothes but those on my back."

"My housekeeper shall get you some more clothes. You can come to the Vicarage as fast as you can, and Deborah shall buy you what you want in the village."

The girl took up his hand and kissed it in a burst of gratitude.

"You are a good man," she said; "yes, I'll come. Poor old grandfather! He'll miss me of an evening, when he comes home; but anything will be better than it has been lately. We've both been miserable—and perhaps some day——"

She smiled, her face flushed again as it had flushed at the first mention of Lady Belfield's name.

"Will they let me come and see my grandfather sometimes?" she asked.

"Of course; and if you learn to be a valuable servant, by-and-by you will get good wages, and then you can be a help to him in his old age."

Madge appeared at the Vicarage before three o'clock, with all her worldly goods tied up in a cotton handkerchief. She was not overcome by the grandeur of the Vicarage, for that grave old house, with its sombre rooms, cool in summer and warm in winter, had been familiar to her in her childhood, when the Vicar catechised her on Sunday evenings in his library with a class of Sunday-school children. She remembered the look of the panelled hall and the old Oriental jars, the Vicar's fishing tackle, and the perfume of rose leaves and lavender. Deborah,

the housekeeper, who was a very homely personage as compared with Mrs. Marrable at the Abbey, received her instructions from the Vicar and sallied out with Madge to the village shop where all the indispensables of this life were kept in stock, and here the two women sat for nearly an hour, choosing and buying; Deborah keenly interested, Madge indifferent, looking with incurious scorn upon the snowy calico and the neat pink and white prints which were being bought for her.

"I suppose you can make your own gowns," said Deborah, rather snappishly, provoked at an indifference which implied ingratitude to the good Vicar.

"I have never had anybody else to make them for me," answered Madge.

"That one you have got on fits pretty fair, though I don't like the style of it," said Deborah, eyeing the supple form from top to toe. "I wouldn't let one of our maids wear such a gown as that, and you'll have to dress different at the Abbey. And you won't be allowed to wear them beads round your neck."

"And yet they say service isn't slavery," retorted Madge, with a scornful laugh.

Deborah spent a couple of sovereigns grudgingly, knowing how many claims her master had upon his benevolence, and having very little sympathy with this ungracious young woman.

"You're to come back to the Vicarage and have tea with us," she said curtly, "and then John is to walk to the Abbey with you."

John was the Vicar's valet, butler, confidant, and factotum. He was known only as John, and seemed to have no occasion for any surname. The Vicar's John was known and respected all over the parish. He was a tall, lean, sharp-nosed man, very chary of speech, and never talking except to the purpose. He was a great reader of newspapers, and a profound politician. Of books he knew none but the Bible, and that he knew better than five curates out of six. He had a way of talking about the patriarchs and the kings and heroes of Israel as if they had been Peel and Brougham, or Bright and Gladstone, which was curious, and quite unconsciously irreverent.

"I don't want any tea," Madge answered, ungraciously.

"Oh, but you must want your tea; you must be almost sinking. What a queer girl you are! Come along now; let's get home as fast as we can. Martha will have got the kettle boiling, and John will be wanting *his* tea."

John was a person whose wants must always be studied. He waited upon the Vicar with exemplary devotion, but he expected that the women folk should wait upon him. In the kitchen and servants' premises he was first in importance, and all gave way before him.

The Vicarage kitchen looked very cheery in the winter afternoon, with a bright red fire burning in an old-fashioned open grate, and the hearth spotless, and the fender shining like silver. The Vicar dined at eight, so this afternoon hour was a period of leisure and repose. The large oak table at which Deborah did her cooking was pushed on one side, and a snug round table covered with a snow-white cloth stood in front of the fireplace. Martha, the housemaid, a rosy-cheeked buxom lass, had prepared everything except the actual making of the tea, a sacred office reserved for Deborah. The tea-tray was spread, and there was a dish of hot buttered cakes frizzling on the hearth, by which sat the Vicar's John in a dignified attitude, reading the *Standard*.

Mr. Rockstone's indoor establishment consisted of these three, and they formed as happy and united a household as could be found in all the county. That catholic spirit of benevolence and peace which breathed in the Vicar's theology pervaded all the acts and thoughts of daily life at the Vicarage.

Madge sat amongst them as an alien. She took her cup of tea in silence, ate very little, had no idea of "making a good tea," as Deborah urged her. It might be that she was fretting at leaving her old grandfather. This supposition softened Deborah's heart a little.

"Now then, miss," said John, rising suddenly, with a military squareness of action, after a tremendous meal, "if you are ready, I am. It will be dark before we get to the Abbey."

It was nearly dark when they passed in front of the porch on their way to the servants' quarters.

There were a couple of grooms and three horses waiting before the porch, two with side saddles. Lights were shining in the windows of the lower rooms, but the hall was lighted only by the fire-glow. It looked a picture of luxury and bright colour as Madge saw it through the open door: armour flashing in the firelight—old tapestry—vivid colouring of Oriental curtains draping chimney-piece and doorways; such an interior as Madge's eyes had never looked upon before.

She caught but a glimpse of that strange splendour, and then John hurried her on by a shrubbery path which skirted one side of the house, to a low door which opened into a stone lobby and thence to the servants' hall. Beyond the servants' hall there was another door, and at this John tapped respectfully.

It was the door of Mrs. Marrable's private sitting-room, only one degree less sacred than Lady Belfield's own apartments. Indeed, the Abbey servants were more afraid of Mrs. Marrable than of Lady Belfield.

The room looked delightfully cosy in the light of a bright wood fire. It was covered from floor to ceiling with a hetero-

geneous collection of pictures, prints, oil paintings, and water-colours. All the pictures rejected from the state apartments by three generations of Belfields had been banished to this limbo. There were doubtless some very vile specimens among this collection, but the general effect, seen in a half-light, was excellent. There was a goodly array of old china also on shelves and in cabinets, for here was brought all the damaged porcelain.

Mrs. Marrable had been enjoying a nap by the fire, preliminary to candles and tea, but she was wide awake in an instant.

"How do you do, John? Very glad to see you. So this is the young person recommended by the Vicar," she said. "Her ladyship told me all about you, my dear, and she wished to see you directly you arrived. I'm to take you to the drawing-room myself as you're a stranger. You may just lay aside your hat and shawl—you'll have to wear a bonnet in future—and come with me. Perhaps you'd like to step into the servants' hall, John, and join them at their tea."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am, I tea'd before I came," John answered gravely. "I must be getting back to see after the Vicar's dinner. Good-night, mum; good-night, miss;" and John marched off by the way he had come, while Madge, trembling slightly, in spite of her native audacity, followed Mrs. Marrable to that enchanted chamber with the curtains of wrought gold and vivid colour, the flashing arms and great stags' heads, which she had seen from outside.

They crossed the firelit hall, and Mrs. Marrable opened the drawing-room door and entered with Madge at her heels, expecting to find this room empty and Lady Belfield alone in her usual place in the inner drawing-room. She was drawing back at the sight of a group round a low tea-table near the fire, two ladies in riding habits, and Sir Adrian in his hunting clothes, lolling luxuriously in their low easy chairs.

"Don't go away, Mrs. Marrable," said Lady Belfield. "You have brought me the young person, I see."

She rose and left the tea-table and came over to the other end of the spacious room, where Mrs. Marrable stood with Madge beside her, doubtful whether to withdraw or to remain, while the girl's dark eyes gazed across empty space to the bright glow of lamp and firelight in which those three figures were seated.

She gazed at Sir Adrian with a look half of surprise, half of admiration. She had caught chance glimpses of those pale, refined features, across the width of the parish church as Sir Adrian stood in the old-fashioned curtained pew in the chancel. But those glimpses had not familiarized her with his face. It was new to her to-night in the glow of lamp and fire, radiant

with happiness, as he talked to Helen Deverill, who sat nursing her hat upon her knees, and smiling up at him, with a charming unconsciousness of her very liberal display of patent-leather Wellingtons.

The girl hardly saw Lady Belfield's calm, kind face, so absorbed was all her power of vision by that face in the firelight; but she courtesied when her new mistress spoke to her, as she had been taught to courtesy to her betters in the Sunday-school.

"I am glad you have come so soon," said Constance; "I hope you will be happy with your fellow-servants, and that you will try to please Mrs. Marrable, who will be very kind to you, I know."

There was no patronizing admonition, no word about duty or desert, only a kind and friendly welcome for the stranger.

"I should like to have had a little talk with you," added Lady Belfield, "but I am engaged just now. Mr. Rockstone has told me how much he is interested in you."

"He has been the only friend I ever had except grandfather," answered Madge.

"Say, my lady," whispered the housekeeper.

"Then I hope you will try to be happy here, if it is only to please that kind friend," said Lady Belfield.

"Yes, my lady, I will try."

She courtesied again, and followed the housekeeper out of the room, and went back to the servants' offices to begin her new life. Helen and her sister began to criticize her directly she was out of the room.

"What a handsome girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Baddeley: "worlds too pretty for a servant. How inconvenient when girls in that station of life are born with such good looks. What made you engage her, Lady Belfield? For my part, I detest pretty servants. They always set all the indoor men by the ears, and make the other maids ill-tempered. There ought to be a dead level of commonplace features and muddy complexions among young women of that class."

"Surely you would not like to be waited upon by gorgons," remonstrated Adrian, laughing.

"I did not say anything about gorgons. There is a middle distance between beauty and ugliness. I like my servants to occupy that neutral ground of inoffensive mediocrity. You haven't told me why you engaged this girl, dear Lady Belfield."

"You haven't given me time," said Constance, smiling at the animated face, and then she told just enough of the girl's story to awaken interest in sympathetic minds, and both sisters appeared full of kindly feeling, frivolous as Lady Belfield was sometimes disposed to consider them.

Adrian was in high spirits this afternoon as he sat by Helen's side, feeding her with sweet things as if she had been a bird,

thinking her absolutely bewitching as she nibbled pound-cake, and acknowledged to a passionate love for buns. These two had been pottering about with the hounds side by side all day—a wretched day for sport, but a very good day for Adrian, who could only enjoy his divinity's society fully when there was a bad scent and a great deal of waiting about outside the coverts. The Miss Toffstaffs had been eloquent in their animadversions upon Miss Deverill. They even wondered that Sir Adrian's better judgment did not prevent such immorality.

"I call it disgraceful conduct even in him," said Dorothy.

"And what *can* one call it in *her?*" responded Isabel Treducey.

There were a knot of Dianas clustered on the opposite side of the road, keenly observant of Helen and Adrian, in the midst of their own light prattle.

"I believe she has hooked him," said Matilda Treducey, who was horsey and outspoken.

"What, you can't imagine he'll marry such a brazen-faced flirt," exclaimed Dorothy.

"My dear, I can imagine anything. Men are such fools."

But if it were folly, it was a pleasant folly while it lasted. Never had Adrian been so happy as in this dreary December—never before had there been for him this glory and brightness over earth and sky, this glamour of passionate love which filled the world with light and life and gladness and ever-hurrying emotion. He felt like a man borne down the tide of a rushing river, or carried by a swift horse, with the freshness of the air in his nostrils, the sunlight shining upon him. He had a delicious sense of being hurried onward without knowing or caring whither. The journey was in itself so rapturous, he scarce asked himself where was the goal.

His mother startled him one morning soon after Madge's advent at the Abbey, by asking him abruptly:

"Adrian, are you going to marry Helen Deverill?"

He flushed crimson at the suddenness of the attack. They were alone together before breakfast, standing in the window of the breakfast-room, and had both been silent and thoughtful until that moment, watching the falling snow.

"To marry," he faltered; "what a startling attack, mother!"

"My dear boy, you must know your own mind by this time. Everybody tells me you are in love with Miss Deverill; and if you don't mean to marry her, and if you are not compromised by any declaration, you had better go away and let people see that they are wrong. I am tired of being questioned and congratulated about a potential daughter-in-law."

"Mother, how strangely you say that! You like her, don't you?"

"I hardly know my own mind about her, Adrian. There are times when she bewitches me, almost as she has bewitched you; and then I am afraid of her, Adrian; I am full of fear for your happiness."

"It is too late to talk about fear, mother. I gave her my heart long ago. I think it must have been the first time I saw her. But indeed you have no cause for fear. She is the most innocent, child-like creature the sun ever shone upon. She is as open as a summer sky. Yes, I have studied her character, and I am not afraid to trust my life into her keeping. You are right, mother: it is time I should declare myself. I have been living in a fool's paradise—too happy to take thought of the morrow."

"Then you mean to marry her?"

"Mean! How can I be sure that she will have me?"

"There is no fear of a refusal."

"Then you think she loves me?" he asked eagerly, his face brightening as he spoke.

"I think you are Sir Adrian Belfield, and the best match in the county."

"Mother, that is a detestable speech, and not a bit like you."

"My dearest, to my mind you are the most lovable young man in England. But I am afraid of Colonel Deverill's daughter. She has been brought up in a bad school. She has graduated at fashionable watering-places and in gambling saloons. I would ever so much rather you had fallen in love with Lucy Freemantle."

"I should be as likely to fall in love with that yew obelisk yonder," said Adrian impatiently. "But don't let us argue the point, mother. If I can but be so fortunate as to win her, I know she will make you love her. She will creep into your heart, and be to you as a daughter before you have quite decided whether you can trust her."

"And that is the worst of it, Adrian. I may learn to love her without being able to trust her."

Mother and son breakfasted together, for the most part in silence. Both were pre-occupied. Lady Belfield felt that she had precipitated the inevitable by her questions; and yet when evil is inevitable it may as well be faced. She thought of those other girls whom she would have preferred for her son's choice—of the Treduceys, who were only just tolerable as individuals, but who were excellent in the way of race and antecedents; of Lucy Freemantle, who was a really estimable girl, a pretty-looking, fresh-complexioned, uninteresting young Englishwoman, much too shy to make the most of her advantages. Could she wonder that her son preferred this outspoken, fascinating girl, with her light-hearted gaiety, her child-like delight in life, her tender, caressing ways, and low musical voice?

"No hunting," said Adrian, after breakfast, going off to the stables.

He ordered a pair of horses to be roughed, and an hour afterwards he was driving his four-wheel dogcart along the road that led to Morcomb.

Helen was alone in the billiard-room, practising the spot stroke, in a neat little blue frock, with a scarlet waistcoat. "The Guards' colours," she told Adrian, when he admired it.

"Leo was ordering one from her tailor, so she ordered one for me at the same time," said Helen. "Kind, wasn't it?"

"Very kind."

Adrian wondered a little at Mrs. Baddeley's somewhat lavish expenditure, since he had been told that her husband had very small means—a mere pittance beyond his pay.

"I am quite alone," said Helen, when they had seated themselves on each side of the hearth. "There was a telegram from Brindisi this morning, and father and Leonora rushed off by the express on their way to Paris. They are not to stop travelling till they get to Paris, and they may be just in time to meet Major Baddeley, who will travel as fast as ever he can from Brindisi; and then they will stop in Paris two or three days to see the sights, and then they will come back to poor disconsolate me."

"You do not look very disconsolate," said Adrian, contemplating her admiringly, as she sat in a lazy attitude, with her hands clasped above her head, with its loose mass of dark auburn hair.

"To tell you the truth, I don't at all mind being alone for a change. If it were hunting weather I should rather rejoice in their absence, for I could have a second horse—Leo's. Of course she told me not to ride him; but of course I shouldn't mind that, if this beastly snow would only give way. But what can one do in such weather as this?"

"Well, there *are* resources—one's books and one's piano."

"Oh, I have too much quicksilver in my veins for that kind of life. I want movement, air, variety—people to talk to me."

"People to admire and adore you, you mean," said Adrian.

"Yes, it is nice to be adored. One gets spoiled at a place like Monte Carlo, where there are so many idle young men, who can't afford to be always shooting pigeons or playing trente-et-quarante, and who are obliged to fall in love with somebody, *pour passer le temps*. But don't let us talk nonsense. I am growing a very serious personage in this rural atmosphere, I can assure you. If I were to stay here another winter I should ask the Vicar to give me a district, and go about among the

cottagers. I find I am very much looked down upon by other young ladies because I don't do that."

"Pray, don't; it is not in your line. There are bees and butterflies. You belong to the butterflies—beautiful insects, but useless except for the delight their grace and beauty give to man. We might exist without bees, but life would be unendurable without butterflies."

"How sweet of you to say that," exclaimed Helen. "Then I will not be false to my vocation. I shall try to fulfil my mission as a butterfly."

And then, after a pause, she said carelessly:

"Isn't it funny that you and I should be sitting on each side of the fire, like Darby and Joan?"

"Funny, Helen? No, it is intensely serious. It is the finger of Fate that has motioned us to these two chairs." Then, suddenly crossing the hearth and seating himself close beside her: "Shall we not be Darby and Joan for life, Helen—always, always together, with the right to sit by our own fireside? Say yes, my darling; say yes. You know how dearly I love you. There need be no passionate speeches, no romantic wooing. I have loved you from the hour we first sat beside this hearth. Tell me on this spot, dear love, where first we met, that you give me love for love, that you will be my wife."

He drew her to his breast, and she let her head sink upon his shoulder. She was his own now; that lovely hair, with its delicate perfume, was his to caress; and the lovely lips did not refuse themselves to the kiss of betrothal.

"I don't know if I ought to pledge myself like this in my father's absence," she said, withdrawing herself suddenly from her lover's arm, with a touch of prudishness. "He ought to be consulted, ought he not—Adrian?"

How deliciously she murmured his name for the first time.

"He shall be consulted," said Adrian. "But I have no fear of his withholding his consent."

"Oh, you know you are a good match," cried Helen, tossing up her head. "You are King Cophetua and I am the beggar maid; and what can the beggar maid's father say to the King, except to thank him for his condescension?"

"My darling, you know that you are the queen and I am the beggar; a suppliant for the infinite boon of your love."

"Pray, does Lady Belfield know that you mean to give her *me* for a daughter-in-law?" asked Helen abruptly.

"She does know that it is the desire of my heart to do so."

"Poor dear Lady Belfield, I am sure she would rather have had anybody else. That strictly proper and rather pretty Miss Freemantle, for instance. Will you swear that you were never in love with Miss Freemantle?"

"I won't, because you know as well as possible that I never knew what love meant till I loved you."

"Ah, that is a kind of sophistical asseveration that all lovers make. 'Were you never in love before?' says the lady. We are such jealous creatures—jealous of the past, the present, and the future, but most of all of the past. 'I never knew true love till I saw you,' replies the gentleman. But that commits him to nothing. He may have been in love a hundred times before. And you are five-and-twenty, Adrian. You *must* have been in love."

"I may have had a spasm or two of calf-love. I once rather admired Matilda Treducey."

"No, don't tell me *that*—anything but that. I should like to think you had good taste even before you knew me. And now, will you come for a walk? I want to see the horses and dogs. Don't be frightened. I am not going to present you to the stablemen as my future husband."

"I wish you would. It would be a kind of security that you will marry me. Put on your warmest wraps, love. It is very cold out of doors."

"I am not going to be called 'love,' or 'darling,' or any of those sickly sweet appellations. You are to call me Helen, and I shall call you Adrian. There is a world more meaning in our own two names, which belong to us individually, than in any barley-sugar epithets that all the world uses."

"Then you shall be Helen, my Helen, I ask for no sweeter name. Helen, the destroyer of ships and of men:

> 'Is this the face that launched a thousand ships,
> And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?'"

"Is that some of Tennyson's nonsense?"

"No, it is Marlowe's nonsense."

"Marlowe? A new poet, I suppose. Please ring that bell for me, Adrian. I want a handful of sugar for the horses."

"Happy horses to be fed with sweets from such sweet hands."

"Now, have we not agreed that you are to indulge in none of that nonsense? I will have no sentimentality. You must treat me as your comrade and friend, or I will have nothing to say to you."

Her prettily authoritative air took the sting out of her speech. He submitted, and accompanied her meekly on her round to the stables, which was a long business. It was not that there were many horses, but each was a personal acquaintance and had the strongest claims upon Helen's attention; and there was a good deal of time lost in running in and out of boxes in the endeavour to re-adjust the balance of favour, when one had had

more than his due share of sugar, and another snorted indignant demands across the top of a door. And then there were the fox-terriers that lived in the stables, and the yard dogs outside, all equally exacting.

"I hope they will be able to live without you for a week or two," said Adrian.

"They cannot live without me. Where I go they must go."

"What, on your father's yacht, for instance?"

"No, I have only a beggarly allowance of one small dog on the yacht."

"And when you pay visits?"

"I never do pay visits. Don't you know that we are nomads —almost friendless nomads. Leo has friends—her husband's brother officers and their people. It is a crack regiment, you know, and Frank is quite the smallest person in it. Leo goes into society. Leo visits at country houses. I don't. I am a Bohemian, a savage, a wild girl of the woods. You will change your mind perhaps when you come to consider the kind of person you have chosen."

"I have chosen her; to me she is perfect. My dearest, I love you ever so much better for not being a woman of the world. But I am not going to let you mope alone here while your people are away. You must come to the Abbey. My mother shall fetch you this afternoon."

"It would be very nice; but do you think Lady Belfield would like it?"

"I am sure she would. You cannot grow too near and dear to her. I want you to be to her as a daughter, in advance of the tie that is to make you one."

"She is very sweet," said Helen gravely. "It is easy for me to love her; but I'm afraid it may be difficult for her to love me."

"Indeed it will not. Come, and try your power. I believe she loves you already. And now I will leave you to make your preparations for coming to the Abbey."

"But shall I not look rather foolish if I pack my trunks upon your invitation, and if Lady Belfield should not care about having me?"

"She will care. She shall be here at four o'clock to fetch you. Show her how punctual and business-like you can be. You can send your heavy luggage in the stable-cart—or shall I send for it?"

"Oh no; our own men can take my luggage. If you insist upon it, I will get ready, even at the risk of looking foolish."

CHAPTER VII.

NOT QUITE CONTENT

Helen Deverill had been staying at the Abbey for nearly three weeks. She had become domesticated there, and seemed a part of the family life. Lady Belfield found herself wondering how she had ever managed her existence without the girlish figure always at her side, prompt and swift to anticipate her wants and wishes, to cut the leaves of her books, and to arrange her crewels, to listen with an enraptured air to her music. She was more than reconciled to the idea that this girl was to be her daughter in the future. She was grateful to Providence for having given her such a daughter.

"If she is only as devoted to Adrian as she seems to be!" thought the mother. "If she is only true!"

There is always that doubt, until love and lovers have been tried in the furnace of hard experiences.

Colonel Deverill and his elder daughter were still in Paris. That lively city was at its best just after the turn of the year. Major Baddeley and his wife had numerous friends there, French and English. They were staying at the Grand Hotel, and they were seeing everything. The Colonel had been less eager to go back to Devonshire, seeing that Helen was so happily placed with her future mother-in-law. He had replied to Adrian's letter, asking his consent to the engagement, with characteristic candour.

"I confess that I saw which way you and Helen were drifting, and that I was heartily glad," he wrote. "She is a sweet girl, and will make you a sweet wife. Of course you know that, from a worldly point of view, you could hardly do worse. I have not a shilling to give my daughters. They will have my estate between them when I am dead and gone, and, if there should be a radical change in the condition of Ireland, the property may be worth something. At present it is worth little more than nothing. My best tenant is two years and a half in arrear with his rent; my worst has threatened to shoot me for taking out his doors and windows in a futile attempt to eject him. But I won't plague you with these dismal details. Happily, you are rich and generous, and you can afford to marry a girl whose beauty and innocence are her only dower."

Thus assured of the Colonel's approval, and seeing his mother growing daily better pleased with his choice, Adrian Belfield was completely happy. The die being cast, his friends and neigh-

bours accepted the inevitable, and congratulated him with seeming heartiness on his engagement. Even the Miss Treduceys and the Miss Toffstaffs were gracious, taking an early occasion to call upon Lady Belfield and to ask if this startling news was really, really true.

"It is quite true, and I have my future daughter-in-law staying with me," answered Constance. "She and Adrian are out riding; but they will be home to tea, if you can stay and see them."

"We shall be charmed," said Dorothy Toffstaff, who had driven her smart little cart over from the heights above Chadford, and had picked up Matilda Treducey on her way. It was a long drive from Chadford to Wilmington, but the Toffstaffs, with their inexhaustible stud, made light of distances. They liked to be everywhere, and were to be met with at all possible points within twenty miles of their house.

The Treducey stables were altogether on a different footing, and there were daily quarrels and heartburnings as to who should have cattle to ride or drive. Thus it had happened of late that the Treduceys were always being driven in Toffstaff carriages and riding Toffstaff horses. They broke in difficult animals for the Miss Toffstaffs, who, notwithstanding this fact, could never be induced to own the Treducey superiority in riding.

"They have very good hands," said Dorothy, speaking of her dearest friends, "but they have no style. They would be dreadful in the Row."

Style, as imparted by a fashionable riding-master, at a guinea a lesson, was Dorothy's strong point. She balanced herself airily upon her saddle, stuck out her elbows, tossed up her head, or straightened her spine in the last approved manner, and she was an admirable horsewoman as long as her horse behaved himself; but it was the Treduceys' strong point to master vice and inexperience in their horses, and to make all the hunters they ever rode.

And now Dorothy Toffstaff and Matilda Treducey sat on each side of the hearth, and complimented Lady Belfield on her son's choice.

"She is so pretty," said Dorothy, "one can hardly wonder that he fell in love with her. But I hope *you* like her, dear Lady Belfield?"

Dorothy was prepared to receive a reluctant negative.

"Yes, I like her very much; but liking is a cold word. I love her!" Lady Belfield answered frankly.

"Lucky girl, to have such a charming mother-in-law," said Miss Treducey, looking round the noble old drawing-room, which had been a drawing-room in Queen Elizabeth's time, and had echoed the silvery tones of that great Sovereign's speech,

and the graver accents of Burleigh. The Abbey was rich in traditions about dead and gone monarchs and senators. More than one Sovereign had rested there on a royal progress through the West Countree.

Matilda Treducey had always admired the Abbey. If there was one house in which she would rather have ruled than in another, it was this Elizabethan mansion; and to know that it was to be the home of an Irish scapegrace's unsophisticated daughter, a girl who had been brought up anyhow—this was exceeding bitter. Miss Toffstaff also felt that she had been cheated. Sir Adrian was the only good match in that part of the country—and with *his* family and position and *her* wealth, they might have done anything. And he was throwing himself away upon a pauper.

Helen came in with her lover while the gentle Dorothy thus mused. She was flushed with her ride in the cold, clear air, and looked lovely in her neat little felt hat and girlish habit, a little blue cloth habit made by an Irish tailor. Mrs. Baddeley had her hunting gear from the most fashionable habit-maker in London; but then Mrs. Baddeley had her own bills and her own resources, great or small.

Adrian and his *fiancée* were perfectly frank and gracious in their talk with the two young ladies; had no idea of any leaven of malice lurking under the outward semblance of good-will; accepted congratulations and good wishes as a matter of course.

"Yes, we are both very happy," said Adrian, smiling at his betrothed; "I did not think it was the common lot of man to know such bliss."

"You don't hunt now, do you?" asked Miss Toffstaff of Helen. "I haven't seen you out for ever so long."

"No, I have not been out. Adrian is advised not to hunt, and I don't care about it without him."

"That must be a dreadful deprivation though, to anybody who is fond of sport."

The two girls were talking together on one side of the room, while Adrian was engaged with his mother and Miss Treducey on the other side, out of hearing.

"I am very fond of sport," Helen confessed, with a sigh. "I can't help being sorry that Adrian can never be a hunting man. I should so like him to have had the hounds. They say there will be some difficulty about a master when Sir George Rollestone gives them up, as he means to do; and Adrian would be the most natural person to take them. But as he is not allowed to hunt it would be a mockery for him to have anything to do with them."

"What a pity he is not his brother."

"Ah, Mr. Belfield is a capital sportsman, I believe," said Helen, with a slightly regretful air.

"Mr. Belfield is everything that Sir Adrian is not," said Miss Toffstaff sententiously.

"Nature has been kinder to him. Poor Adrian!"

"But then, Sir Adrian is so clever. Mr. Rockstone told me that he has read more than most men of fifty."

"Yes, he has surfeited himself with books. He is very clever."

This was spoken with a sigh. Helen was apt to be oppressed by her lover's intellectual superiority. It was a kind of barrier that kept them apart. He knew so much of books and the men who had written them, and she so little. She was ashamed of her ignorance, and thus dared not talk freely with him upon any intellectual subject, lest he should discover her deficiencies.

"Dorothy Toffstaff was talking about your brother," she said to Adrian later, as they sat over the drawing-room fire in the dusk before going off to dress for dinner.

Helen had kept on her habit. She had a way of sitting about for an hour or two just as she came off her horse, with rumpled hair and bespattered skirts. She was sitting on the hearthrug almost at her lover's feet, staring at the fire in an idle reverie. Lady Belfield had left them half-an-hour ago seated just in the same attitudes. It was not that they had very much to talk about. It was happiness to Adrian even to be in the presence of the woman he loved, to have her near him, a beautiful enchanting creature, whose every tone was music, whose every movement was grace.

"She said that you and Valentine are utterly unlike," pursued Helen, "and yet I have heard your mother say that you are the image of each other."

"I believe we are alike in face and figure—alike with a difference," answered Adrian dreamily. "Our features were cast from the same sketch, but not in the same mould. You will see him very soon, I hope, and judge for yourself. He and I have never lived so long apart, and if I had not had you to give a new colour to my life, I should have felt miserable without him. Even with your sweet companionship I begin to weary for his return."

"Take care! I shall be jealous of any one who steals your thoughts from me—even of a brother. You must be very fond of each other?"

"Fondness can hardly express our feeling. It is something more than affection. It is a sympathy so close that his vexations and his pleasures move me almost as strongly as my own. I have never seen him out of temper without being agitated myself; and in all his great triumphs—on the river, in the

cricket field, at a steeplechase—I have been as elated as if I myself were the victor. Yes, I have felt a thrill of pride and delight far keener than common sympathy."

"I don't think sympathy is by any means common," said Helen lightly. "I believe that the great majority of people are supremely indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others. The world could hardly go on if it were otherwise. We have such a little time to live that we must live fast if we want to get anything out of life."

"Is not that rather a selfish theory?"

"I suppose it is; but I frankly own to being selfish. Selfishness is one of my numerous failings."

"I will not hear you say so. I know you better than you know yourself," he said tenderly, leaning down till his lips touched the golden-brown hair.

"That is a delusion on your part. You only know an ideal Helen, a Helen of your own invention, faultless, a bundle of virtues, a concatenation of noble qualities and lofty feelings. I am not even a blood relation of your Helen. I am full of faults."

"Then I will love you with all your faults. I have plenty of my own to balance them."

"No. You have only three—three great faults."

"Name them. Let me know the worst."

"First, you are too good for me. Secondly, you are far too clever for me. Thirdly, you are not a sportsman."

"The goodness and the cleverness might be easily got over, since they belong rather to your ideal Adrian than to the actual man. But I fear I can never be a sportsman."

"I should have liked my husband to keep a pack of hounds, and to hunt four times a week," sighed Helen, with the air of a child that has been baulked in some eager fancy.

"My dearest, I can never be the typical English squire; nor can I allow the wife I love to spend half her days and nearly all her thoughts in the hunting-field. I want to share your life, Helen; I want your company all day long—your mind, your heart, and all your thoughts and fancies. I would not have one of your thoughts wasted upon horses and hounds."

"I have been brought up to care more for four-footed friends than any others."

"Perhaps you never had a friend who loved you as I do. Such friendship is exacting, Helen. There must be sacrifices."

"Must there? Well, it is not a very great sacrifice for a penniless Irish girl to be your wife, and to live in this lovely old house. It will not be my house, though! I shall only be a secondary person. Your mother must always be the first."

"You do not mind that?" asked Adrian.

"Mind? No, I adore her. She is as much above me as if she were an angelic being. But I shall be Lady Belfield too. Will not that seem strange? Two Lady Belfields in one house. We must live half the year in London and Paris, Adrian. We must not rust away our lives here."

"Do you call this rusting?" he asked tenderly.

Her head rested against his knee, her eyes were looking up at him, starlike in the dim light of the low wood fire.

"No, this is fairyland, dreamland, what you will. But it cannot last much longer—not a moment longer"—as the timepiece chimed the half-hour. "There is half-past seven, and I shall be late for dinner again."

"Don't if you can help it, darling. It is one of the few things that vexes my mother."

Helen made a *moue* as she ran out of the room. It seemed to her that there were a good many things which vexed Lady Belfield. Disorder of all kinds set that gentle lady's teeth on edge, and Helen was the very spirit of disorder.

Half-way to her room she met one of the housemaids in a corridor.

"Is that you, Margaret?" she cried. "Come and help me to dress. I'm awfully late again."

Margaret, *alias* Madge, was Lady Belfield's last *protégée*, the new girl who had been taken into the household out of charity. Mrs. Marrable had pronounced her very amenable, and had taken pains to instruct her in certain domestic duties. Her province was on the upper floor. Helen, who had brought no maid to the Abbey, was struck by the girl's good looks, and had in a manner appropriated her services. She was much quicker of intellect and handier altogether than the average housemaid.

With Margaret's help, Helen contrived to appear in the drawing-room just two minutes before the butler announced dinner.

CHAPTER VIII.

"NO GENTLEMAN WOULD HAVE ACTED SO"

THERE had been but the briefest letters from Valentine either to Lady Belfield or to Adrian. He was at Monte Carlo, shooting pigeons, riding other peoples' horses in steeplechases, drinking the cup of pleasure to the dregs, and he intended to return to the Abbey in time for the last of the hunting. This was all

that was known about him, and now the season was nearly over, and he might be expected at any time. His rooms were ready, his horses fit, his own particular groom was on the look-out for his return.

It was a dull afternoon in February, and Helen was alone in the library, her lover's favourite room, the very sanctuary of his life, as it were—the place where he read, and thought, and played, and lived his own sacred inner life, with which the rest of the household had little in common.

It was not a conventional library—not a place of massive bookcases and regulation sets of books. It was half a music-room, with an organ at one end, and a grand piano in the angle near the old-fashioned fireplace. Adrian had inherited his mother's love of music, and played both organ and piano. The books were chiefly of his own collecting, a library of modern *belles lettres*, in several languages.

"You are so awfully learned," exclaimed Helen, after glancing at a shelf of German metaphysics. "Do you really, really read those dreadful books?"

"I have spent some thoughtful hours that way, love. I won't go so far as to say that I understand them."

"Does anybody?"

And then she would take out a volume of Keats or Wordsworth, and twirl its pages for a little while, and declare that the poetry was quite too lovely.

"Which do you like best, Keats or Wordsworth?" he asked.

"I don't quite know," looking up at him with interrogative eyes, to see which of the two she ought to prefer. "They are both so sweet. Keats is delicious—but Wordsworth is—Wordsworth. No, I cannot find the right words to express my appreciation; but I can feel his poetry."

And Adrian was content to accept this kind of thing as the expression of a spiritual essence that had not been concentrated into speech.

This afternoon Helen had the library all to herself. Adrian had gone a long journey to Exeter, to look at a pair of horses which he had been advised to buy for his mother's barouche. The horses she was using were beginning to show signs of wear. He was not expected back till dinner-time. Lady Belfield had complained of a headache after lunch, and had gone to her room to lie down. She had been having bad nights of late, and sorely wanted sleep. The cause of these wakeful nights was as far off as Monte Carlo. The mother had been full of anxiety about that wayward younger son, whose prolonged absence might mean mischief of some kind.

This afternoon was dull and cold, with occasional showers. Helen made up her mind to spend it indoors. She would amuse

herself in that dear old room, free to peer and pry about like an inquisitive child.

The delight of looking at things all by herself—opening private drawers—turning over books and papers—lasted about half-an-hour. Then she played the piano a little, trying first one piece and then another, never getting beyond a page of any composition before she was tripped up by a difficulty, and turned the leaf in disgust. Wearying of this, she went to the organ and pulled out the stops and touched the dumb senseless keys; and then, in a fit of temper, she flew to the bell and rang it sharply.

"It is miserably dull indoors," she said to herself; "I must get a good gallop."

The footman appeared in the usual leisurely manner of a servant who reproves any ill-bred impetuosity in the ringing of a bell by being a little slower than usual in answering it.

"Will you ask Dodman to saddle a horse for me?" she said; "I should like Mr. Belfield's last new chestnut."

"Yes, madam. Will you require Dodman?"

"I sha'n't require him, but I suppose I shall be obliged to have him," said Helen.

It was one of her grievances that Adrian would not allow her to ride without her groom. She liked the sense of freedom, being accountable to no one for where she rode or what she did with her horse.

She had heard a good deal about the chestnut hunter's evil propensities, and it was naturally on that account she wanted to ride him.

But Dodman was not the kind of man to be caught napping; and he knew that Sir Adrian would not put his future wife on an ill-disposed brute like the chestnut. So when Helen ran down to the hall in her habit and hat, eager for the fray, she found the pretty skewbald Cinderella standing in front of the porch.

"Am I to ride that brute?" she asked.

It was the brute she generally rode with Adrian.

"You don't find no fault with her, do you, ma'am?" asked Dodman, immovable as a rock.

"No, except that she is a sheep. I sent you a message by Bellows. I wanted to ride the chestnut."

"You couldn't manage that 'oss, ma'am. He's too much for any lady."

"He wouldn't be too much for me."

"I should be very sorry to see you on him, ma'am."

"Oh, you are much too careful. You have spoiled Sir Adrian's riding, and now I suppose you want to spoil mine."

Dodman was too superior a person to notice this unworthy

petulance. He flung the young lady into her saddle, and gave her the bridle without a word, and then he mounted behind her and followed her along the avenue.

She punished him for her disappointment by taking the skewbald over some of the worst ground in the neighbourhood, and at a break-neck pace. She did everything that she ought not to have done in the course of an hour and a half of hard riding. It was six o'clock when she went back to the Abbey.

There was a good fire in the library. She saw the red light shining through the lattices and the emblazoned glass of the upper mullions. She was cold after her ride in the wind and rain, and she went to the library with the idea of enjoying herself for half-an-hour in front of the burning logs.

She did not expect to see Adrian till dinner-time, but to her surprise there he was, sitting in a low armchair by the hearth, figure and face both in shadow, as she approached him.

She stole towards him on tiptoe, bent over the back of his chair and kissed him.

The kiss was returned with interest. Two strong arms were thrown back to clasp and encircle her. She was caught and pinioned as she bent over the chair.

But in the next instant she snatched herself from those encircling arms, and drew back with an indignant exclamation, crimson with rage.

"It is not Adrian," she said. "How dare you? How dare you?"

A tall figure rose from the chair with a careless, easy movement, and stood before her, erect. Taller and broader than Adrian's figure, stronger—different somehow, and yet so like, so like—that it was difficult to believe that this man was not Adrian himself.

"How dare you?" she muttered again, almost beside herself with anger; all her Irish blood boiling in her veins.

"My dear young lady, you must allow me to observe that it was you who began the assault," said the stranger, with provoking placidity. "That consideration ought at least to mitigate your wrath."

"To—to kiss me like that!"

He laughed at her rage, as if she had been an angry child.

"Would you have a man's lips meet the lips of beauty as if he were kissing his laundress?" he asked lightly. "Besides, I had a right to kiss you—as your future brother."

"No gentleman would have acted so," she said, still fuming, her riding whip vibrating in her clenched hand.

What would she have given to have horsewhipped him! There were women in the world who had done such things.

"No gentleman! Perhaps not," said Valentine. "I have never prided myself upon that conventional distinction, to

which every grocer's son aspires from his cradle. I would rather be a blackguard, and a MAN. I am a being of nerves and muscles, passions and impulses. Whether that kind of thing can be gentlemanlike, I don't know and don't care. Come, Helen, don't be angry. 'Twas no stranger who returned your kiss just now, but your lover's twin brother, who claims the right to love you. You cannot be greatly loved by him without being a little loved by me. We are two halves of one whole, and I am the stronger half. You cannot be wax to him and marble to me; melt at his touch, and freeze at mine. Our natures are too closely interwoven. To love one of us is to love the other. Come, Helen, forgive and be friends."

He held out his hand, and she could not refuse to give him her own. But the little gloved hand lay supine in his strong clasp, and there was no such thing as pardon in her heart.

"I have always heard that you are a very strange person," she said, "but as you are Adrian's brother, I suppose we must be friends."

And with this not over-civil speech she left him to his reflections.

He threw himself into the chair by the fire, stirred up the logs, and took out his cigar-case for a comfortable smoke before he went to his dressing-room. When the door was shut upon Helen—he had not troubled himself to open it for her—he laughed softly to himself.

"As lovely as her namesake and as spirited as Kate the curst," he muttered. "I like her ever so much better for that flash of temper. Upon my soul, Adrian has not made half a bad choice. I hardly gave him credit for such good taste. But then the girl was flung into his lap, as it were. No doubt Deverill came here of malice aforethought, to plant his daughter upon my mother's son. Hark, there's the cart, and Adrian."

He went out to the porch to receive his brother, who was almost overcome with delight at seeing him.

"My dear fellow, what ages you have been away. How glad my mother must be! You have seen her, of course."

"Not yet. I have only been here an hour; came by the slow afternoon train from Exeter. They told me my mother was lying down, not over-well, so I wouldn't have her disturbed. I've been sitting over the fire in the library, half asleep. I came by the *Rapide* from Marseilles, straight ahead, crossed the Channel last night, and have been travelling ever since."

"And you have not seen Helen?"

"Oh, yes, I have. Helen and I have made friends already."

He laughed a little as he spoke of her, and the light danced merrily in his eyes. He wondered whether she would give her betrothed a detailed account of their skirmish. The odds were

against it, he thought. Women are curiously shy about trifles. She would lock the story up in her own heart, and always bear malice against him on account of it.

"And you like her?" asked Adrian eagerly.

"There has been no time for liking, but I admire her immensely, and I congratulate you on your good luck."

"Yes, she is lovely, is she not? And as dear as she is lovely."

"Clever and accomplished into the bargain, I suppose?"

"I doubt if you would call her either; yet she is the most fascinating girl I ever met."

"I'm glad she's not learned, or a paragon in the way of accomplishments. Every step that a woman travels in the road to mental perfection is a step that leads away from feminine loveliness. A beautiful woman should be only beautiful. All the rest is outside her sphere. Imagine a lovely forehead that has grown wrinkled over Darwin."

He rattled on lightly, with his arm through Adrian's, as they went into the house and upstairs together.

"Not a word to my mother," said Valentine, as they parted; "I want to surprise her when I go down to dinner."

"I sha'n't see her till then. I've only just time to dress."

Half-an-hour later and Lady Belfield was sitting in her accustomed chair at a respectful distance from the drawing-room fire, with her book-table on one side and her work-basket on the other, when her two sons came in together, more like than usual in their evening dress, which hardly varied in the smallest detail.

The mother rose in a tumult of delight to receive the wanderer.

"My dearest, how could you stay away so long?" she asked, almost piteously.

"A truant disposition, and the perversity of my favourite colour. Never mind, mother. Here I am, and here I mean to stay till after Adrian's wedding."

"I am so glad. I am so happy. How well you are looking. You must have enjoyed yourself very much to stop away so long."

"Oh, I was with very good fellows, and the sky was blue, and the wines were good, and we had a yacht, and knocked about a good deal in some deuced rough weather. The Mediterranean isn't all jam. But altogether the life suited me. There were plenty of pretty women, but not one so pretty as my future sister-in-law," he added in an undertone as Helen entered, in her æsthetic frock of pale blue cashmere, with short sleeves and a short waist, and a babyish bodice which set off her perfect shoulders and swan-like throat.

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She came into the room more slowly than her wont, and a sudden rosy flush swept over her face and neck as she drew near the spot where the two brother were standing.

"Helen, let me introduce my other son," began Lady Belfield.

"We are friends already," answered Valentine. "Are we not, Helen?"

He called her by her Christian name in the easiest way, as a right.

"And will be more than friends—brother and sister, in the future, I hope," said his mother.

"Amen to that sweet prayer," answered Valentine. "Come, mother, it is my privilege to take you in to dinner to-night," as the butler made his announcement, "and I shall astonish you by the justice which a man who has been fed on kickshaws at a Monte Carlo hotel can do to your old-fashioned English fare—your inevitable saddle of mutton and your elderly pheasants."

They went in to dinner, a snug little party of four. The room looked all the brighter for that fourth presence. Their triangular dinners had been marked of late by a gentle dulness.

Lady Belfield was in high spirits, enraptured at the return of her younger born, and Valentine was full of talk about himself and his adventures, good luck and bad luck, the people he had met, and the women with whom he had flirted.

Helen was unusually silent, as if somewhat oppressed by that exuberant gaiety.

Valentine was right in his surmise. Not one word did she say to her betrothed, on that night or afterwards, about her skirmish with Valentine in the library.

CHAPTER IX.

NOT THE AVERAGE GIRL.

"ADRIAN," said Helen, in the breakfast-room next morning, "I want to go home."

It was half-past nine o'clock. Breakfast was over, and Lady Belfield had gone off to her hot-houses and morning interview with the head gardener. It was a hunting day, and Valentine was lolling in an easy chair by the fireplace, waiting for his horse to be brought to the door.

Helen and Adrian were standing in front of the window

watching the drizzling rain. It was a Devonshire morning, wet and warm, with a low grey sky, and a mist from the distant sea.

"Go home, dearest—but why?"

"First, I have been here much too long already. I have no doubt the Treduceys and Toffstaffs are talking about my living here, and expatiating upon my pauperism. 'Hardly bread to eat at home, poor creature!' and so on. But that is a detail. My secondly is more important. Leo and the governor went to Paris ostensibly for a few days, and have stayed three weeks."

"Darling, if you knew how it sets my teeth on edge to hear you say 'the governor.'"

"Then in future it shall be 'my Father,'" with a solemn air. "But if I really were your darling, nothing I could say would ever set your teeth on edge. However, as I was saying, those people have stayed too long in Paris. They must be spending a great deal of money. Somebody told me the Grand is an expensive hotel."

"It is not cheap."

"I shall order them home immediately, and the only way to make them obey is to go home myself. As long as the gov—my father knows I am provided for here, he will pursue his reckless career abroad."

"We can't spare you yet awhile, Helen," said Adrian tenderly. "You have become the daughter of the house. My mother couldn't do without you. We shall only let you go home in time to get your frocks ready for your metamorphosis. I believe the law which insists upon new frocks as a preliminary of marriage is like the laws of the Medes and Persians, and altereth not with the march of enlightenment."

"Perhaps when a man marries a girl out of the gutter he does it to escape being pestered about her trousseau," said Valentine; "and that when a fellow runs away with another man's wife, it is for the sake of skipping the horrors of the marriage ceremony and the ordeal by wedding presents."

"No, Helen, we can't spare you yet," pursued Adrian, ignoring this ribald commentary.

"No, Helen, we can't spare you yet," echoed Valentine, from his easy chair. "There's my horse. I'd better be off pretty sharp. It's a long way to Tadpole Pond."

He jumped up, took his hat and whip, and hurried out. Adrian and Helen watched him mount and ride away, tall and straight, wearing his weather-stained scarlet coat with an easy grace, as much at home on the impatient hunter as he had been in his easy chair.

The horse reared straight on end, while Helen and Adrian

were watching, and his progress for the first few hundred yards seemed to be more upon two legs than on four.

"Oh, how I envy him! how I should like to be going with him!" cried Helen spontaneously, forgetting that only a few minutes before she had been trying to get herself out of that house, deeming that she could not exist beneath the same roof with Valentine Belfield. "Would he take me next Friday, do you think? Would you mind?"

"Would I mind? Well, no, not if you really care for hunting so very much."

"Care for it? I adore it. Why, you know it is my passion. I wish with all my heart it were not. Just for once in a way, that I may see a little more of your picturesque country," she pleaded.

"I could drive you all over Devonshire, Helen."

"Oh, but there is no fun in driving; and there are lots of places where you could not drive—break-neck hills, boggy bits of moorland, woods and winding streams. The only proper way to see a country is after the hounds, when one's blood is up, and one's horse is on fire with eagerness. You'll let me hunt a little more before the season is over—just once or twice or so—won't you, Adrian? Think how very good I have been for the last three weeks."

This was said with the air of a martyr.

"My poor, self-sacrificing Helen," said her lover, half sad and half ironical. "Yes, you must hunt, I suppose. You must go and hazard that life on which hangs my own in the most break-neck country in England. I will go out with you and potter about while you follow Valentine, who always takes the most hazardous line, and will lead you over some of the worst ground in Devonshire."

"Then may I send for my little Irish mare to-morrow? Your horses have charming manners, but they are not quick enough for hounds. Norah Creina is nothing much to look at, but she's a splendid goer."

Naturally, Helen had her way. The Irish mare was sent for that afternoon, and the young lady said no more about her desire to go back to Morcomb.

She tried to forget Valentine's offence and her own indignation. "After all, he is to be my brother," she told herself.

His presence in the house was a disturbing influence; even the expectation of his return fluttered her spirits a little as she sat at work with Lady Belfield that afternoon, while the rain pattered against the windows. She was not very fond of needlework, but she had felt constrained to put on an air of occupation in the long wet afternoons, lest her future mother-in-law should take offence at her idleness.

This afternoon her thoughts were in the steep break-neck lanes or on the brown barren moorland, rather than with her basket of many-coloured silks, or the bunch of poppies which she was stitching at mechanically, caring very little whether the shading came out well or ill, stopping every now and then to stifle a yawn.

Adrian was in the library writing letters, and the two women were alone together.

"What dreadful weather for the hunting," said Lady Belfield, looking up at the window for the twentieth time in half-an-hour.

"*They* won't mind it," exclaimed Helen, with a regretful air. "What does rain matter if they have a run? There is nothing more enjoyable than dashing through wind and bad weather after a good fox. It is only when one is standing about in a hopeless condition that one minds the rain. I only wish I were with them under that downpour."

"My dear Helen, I hope you will never forget that Adrian has been strongly warned against hunting."

"I am not likely to forget it," answered Helen, with a touch of pettishness.

"And you won't tempt him to disobey his doctor, will you, dear?"

"Of course not. But I suppose there will be no harm in my going out with Mr. Belfield next Friday. I should not give him any trouble. I can always take care of myself."

"Any harm—no, I suppose not," replied Lady Belfield, with an air which implied that she thought the proposition somewhat incorrect.

Valentine came home earlier than usual. The day had been unsatisfactory. He had had two of his best horses out, and there had not been work enough for one. He went off to change his clothes in no very agreeable humour. It was dusk when he left his dressing-room, but the lamp was lighted in the corridor, and there was light enough for him to see the face of a girl whom he met half-way between his room and the open gallery above the hall.

She was dressed in the Abbey livery of dark red merino and long white apron. She wore the muslin mob cap of the Abbey housemaids; but she looked no more like them than if she had been a duchess who had just put on that costume in a frolic, a duchess whom Gainsborough might paint and *cognoscenti* adore.

Her dark eyes flashed upon Valentine Belfield like a danger signal. He pulled up suddenly, and stood face to face with her.

"What in the devil's name brings you here?" he exclaimed.

"I hope you are not sorry to see me, Mr. Belfield?"

"Never mind what I am. Tell me what devilry has brought you here, in that get up. You are not a servant here, I hope?"

"But I am. I have been living here more than a month. There was no devilry in it, I assure you. It was my first and only friend, the Vicar, who got me the place—and it was Lady Belfield's kindness which made room for me. I have been trying to improve myself," she added, looking up at him shyly. "I get a glimpse of your mother and of other ladies now and then, and I am trying to find out what ladies are like and how they behave, that I may learn to be a lady."

"You are a fool," muttered Valentine scornfully. "Your wildness was your charm. What have you to do with women of my mother's status? You were a beautiful, ignorant creature, knowing nothing of the world and its deadly-lively ways. You were a woman for a man to love—a splendid, untamed, perhaps untameable, being, for whom a man might go to the devil. Do you suppose that electro-plated gentility will improve you? Do you think your gipsy blood will show to advantage in a Paris bonnet and gown?"

"I think that if I am ever to be a gentleman's wife I must first learn to be a lady," she answered gravely.

"Come, Madge, don't be a fool," said Valentine, with a touch of tenderness, putting his arm round her, and trying to draw her towards him.

She drew herself away from him, pushing him from her with an arm which was a good deal stronger than the average young lady's arm.

He laughed at her vehemence.

"By Jove," he cried, "was that a specimen of your new manners? Is that Herculean style your notion of gentility? Why, my girl, ladies are like lilies: they snap at a gust of wind. Listen here, Madge, there's no use in our talking nonsense. You know I am ridiculously fond of you, and that I would do anything in reason to make you happy; but there is no use in our talking about marriage. You must have seen a little more of what life is like since you have been under this roof, and you must begin to understand that——"

He hesitated, looking down at his embroidered slippers—the mother's gift—at a loss how to frame a sentence that would not end in a brutal admission.

"I must understand that gentlemen don't marry girls of my class," said Madge, finishing his sentence for him, with those brilliant eyes of hers fixed with steady gaze upon his downcast countenance. He could feel their light, was conscious of that earnest scrutiny, though his eyelids were lowered. "Was that what you were going to say?"

"Something like that."

"Well, that's what I don't understand. What I do understand is that if a man loves a girl well enough he will have her for his wife, however low she may be. If he really and truly loves her, he doesn't want to bring shame upon her. It is only half-hearted love that would do that. If a man loves in earnest, and with his whole heart, he will marry the girl he loves. Yes, if he were a duke, and she a girl of blemished character. There is nothing against my character, Mr. Belfield, and you know it. So you had best understand at once that I shall never be anything more to you than your mother's servant—unless I am your wife."

"That's hard upon me, seeing that I am a younger son and not a free agent. Dukes can do as they like, but I can't. You know I am passionately fond of you, Madge. Come, child, don't be unreasonable."

Again he tried to draw her nearer to him, to bring those lips closer to his own, and entangle those flashing glances of hers in the light of his own dark eyes, which were hardly less brilliant.

"My dearest girl," he pleaded, "you know I adore you. What more can you want to know? You ought never to have put yourself into this false position. A servant, you! The queen of beauty handling a broom! You should have listened to me, Madge. I know of the sweetest little cottage, in a garden on the bank of the Chad, far away from your vile swamp. A gentleman's cottage, half hidden under flowering creepers, with a verandah where a fellow could smoke his cigarette after dinner in the summer evenings, and a boathouse where a fellow could keep his boat. You would be in your place, Madge, in that cottage, with a couple of servants to wait upon you. Why should we not be happy, sweet? This world was made for love and lovers."

"This world was made for honest men and women. You are a scoundrel. Yes, you are right, I was a fool to come to this house. But the temptation was too great—to see you—to be near you."

"You might be more than that, my dearest. You might be with me always, if you would. Will you go with me to-morrow to see that cottage, Madge? You could slip out at the back of the house quietly, and I could pick you up near the stables, and drive you there in an hour. The place would not look so pretty as in summer, but it is always picturesque, and—Madge," pleadingly, "we might be so happy there."

"No," she answered resolutely, not with the air of a woman who means yes; "I could never be happy that way."

"Your mother was of another way of thinking, Madge."

"How dare you throw my mother's shame in my face? What do you know of my mother?"

"I have had the honour of meeting her in London society," he answered, with a malicious sparkle in his eyes.

"And I do not even know if she is alive."

"Oh, she is a lady who has made herself a reputation in London, I assure you. When was it I met her? About five years ago, I think, my second year at Cambridge. I was up in town on the quiet, went to a theatre, and supper-party afterwards—a sporting nobleman's party. Your mother was there. Mature, gone to seed a little, perhaps, but remarkably handsome still, and dressed as only a woman of genius knows how to dress at forty—dressed to make forty more attractive than twenty. Your mother would never wear a housemaid's cap, or trundle a mop, I can assure you. She knows her own value too well. She has better sense."

"What is her name in London? I have never heard of her by any name but my own—Madge."

"Oh, she has a name of greater dignity than that. I was introduced to her as Mrs. Mandeville. There was a Major Mandeville, about whom people told some curious stories, but I did not see much of him."

"Do you know where my mother is living now?"

"No, child. But I dare say I could find out. Do you want to know?"

"Yes; I want to know all I can about my mother. Even if she is a wicked woman, leading a bad life, she is more to me than any other woman on this earth. The day may come when she will want my help."

"I fancy she is too clever for that, Madge; but I have no doubt she would be glad to see you, if it were only to be reminded how handsome she was twenty years ago."

A bell rang in a lobby below, the servants' tea-bell.

"I must go," said Madge, hurriedly; and so they parted, Madge to the back stairs and the servants' hall, Valentine to his mother's drawing-room, where tea had been waiting for him for a quarter of an hour, Lady Belfield excusing the delay to Helen and Adrian, on the ground that afternoon tea was more to the returning sportsman than to any one else. "And it so much nicer for us all to have our tea together," she said.

"Don't apologize, mother," said Adrian, smiling at her; "as if we didn't know that your tea would be worse than tasteless if you began without Valentine."

"You have not been so expeditious as usual, Val," said the mother, as her younger son sauntered into the room in velvet jacket and slippers, and with a Byronic throat.

"I was wetter than usual, mother, and taking off my boots

was like drawing double teeth," he answered, as he seated himself at Lady Belfield's side, and attacked a pile of toast.

He looked across at Helen, who was sitting on the other side of the fireplace with her work-basket in her lap, the image of propriety. He looked at her critically, as he sipped his tea and munched his toast, comparing her delicate beauty with that darkly brilliant face he had just now been gazing upon. No two faces could have been more distinct in their beauty, more widely diverse in their characteristics. In Helen's countenance the lightness of a frivolous and shallow nature was as obvious as her beauty. In that other face there were suggestions of the sublime in passion or in thought. It was the face of a woman strong for good or for evil.

There was a relief in watching the play of Helen's countenance after the passionate earnestness and fixed purpose of that other face, so full of evil augury to him, the would-be seducer. Here he could gaze unappalled.

"How pretty she is, just as butterflies and flowers that last a day are pretty," he said to himself; "and how soon a sensible man would get tired of her! Perhaps she may do for my brother all the same," he went on, musing lazily as he ate and drank. "He is a *dilettante;* loves prettiness in everything, from architecture to bookbinding. Yes, she may succeed in making him happy, shallow as she is. He will play the organ to her, expatiate upon Bach and Beethoven, read Shelley and Keats to her, and she will pretend to be interested; and they will get on pretty well together in their namby-pamby way."

He could read Helen's thoughts easily enough as he watched her face in the lamplight. Her eyes were cast down for the most part on her teacup or her work-basket, but now and then she glanced shyly, inquisitively, in his direction.

"She feels embarrassed still on account of yesterday's escapade," he said to himself, "yet she is monstrous curious about me, would like to know what manner of man I am; would like to be friends."

He condescended to describe his day presently, when he had taken the edge off his appetite, and then asked Helen why she was not out.

"The Toffstaffs and the Treduceys were full of inquiries about you, thinking it such a pity you don't hunt now. You seemed to enjoy it so much, they said."

"They were not over-civil to me when I was out," said Helen; "I shouldn't ride to hounds for the pleasure of their society—but, but," faltering a little, and with a deprecating glance at Adrian, "I should very much like to get one or two more days before the end of the season."

"One or two more days," cried Valentine. "What bosh!

You must go every day—get every chance you can. There are horses enough to give you two a day if you like. I hope Adrian is not so selfish as to want to keep you at home."

"Does it rank as selfishness, Val, for a man to want his wife's society? If Helen were to hunt three days a week after we are married, it would be a kind of semi-divorce, for which I am not prepared."

"All the more reason that she should make the most of her time while she is single," retorted Valentine. "If I were you, Helen, I would not be denied a single day. I would make the most of my freedom in anticipation of a life of captivity."

"I shall not think it captivity," murmured Helen, with her sweetest smile; and Adrian was content.

There was a telegram from Colonel Deverill next morning to announce his arrival in London. He would be at Morcomb next day with Major and Mrs. Baddeley, and hoped to find Helen at home.

"Then I shall not have to trouble you, Mr. Belfield," said Helen. "Frank is devoted to hunting, and he will take care of Leo and me—if, if you don't mind my having one or two more days, Adrian."

"You will be out of my jurisdiction, Helen—if you really must go home."

"Oh, indeed I must. Father is very peremptory. I ought to go, dear Lady Belfield, though I am heart-broken at ending this happy visit."

"It will not be long, dear, before this house will be your home," answered Lady Belfield gently.

"Do you know that this is a very uncivil way of throwing me over, Helen?" said Valentine laughingly. "You engage a man to show you the country—a man who knows every inch of the ground; and then you inform him that a certain Major Baddeley, who perhaps never put his nose in North Devon before, will be ever so much better a guide."

"Only because he is an old friend; almost a relation."

"And am I an enemy; and am I not to be almost a relation?"

"I think you know what I mean, Mr. Belfield."

She was going to answer her telegram. Quicker in his movements always than his brother, Valentine sprang to the door.

"Why am I Mr. Belfield?" he asked in a lowered voice, as he opened it for her, "why not Valentine as well as Frank?"

"Oh, I could not—not yet," she said.

"Strangers yet? Strangers, after the day before yesterday?" in still lower tones, detaining her on the threshold.

She flushed crimson, looked at him angrily, and passed him as if he were dirt.

"The butterfly can hold her own," he thought, as he went back to the table to finish his breakfast.

He did not see Helen again till they met at the covert side, where he was presented by her to Mrs. Baddeley, who was in high glee at returning to country life after her Parisian dissipations.

"What did we see? Everything!" she answered, when Valentine questioned her about "Le petit Muffle," the last burlesque opera which was convulsing the boulevards and commanding forty francs for a stall. "We sent for an agent on the morning after our arrival, gave him a list of the pieces we wanted to see, and gave him carte blanche as to the price of seats. The tickets were dear, but we saw all the pieces which native Parisians had been waiting for months to see. It is the only way."

"Yes, it is the only way," said Major Baddeley, a fat fair man, who looked too heavy for his horse, and whose province in life was to coincide with his wife.

Valentine contrived to show his future sister-in-law the way, in spite of Major Baddeley's prior claim as a brother-in-law *in esse*. He led her up and down break-neck hills, and forded the stream in all manner of risky places. Those two never lost sight of the hounds, nor of each other, and were the first in at the death after the hunt servants. When the Baddeleys came up, Helen and Valentine had dismounted, and were standing side by side, while the hounds were fighting over the mutilated remains of poor pug.

It was their first day together, but not their last. Mrs. Baddeley was devoted to fox-hunting, and her devotion was an excuse for Helen.

"It is my last season," she told Adrian. "I shall give up all masculine sports when I am married."

"Will you, dearest? Then your self-sacrifice shall not be unrewarded, for I will get you the prettiest yacht that can be built at Devonport. Shall it be steam or sailing, eh, Helen?"

"Will you really? Oh, you darling. Yachting is my ruling passion. Yes, you may think I am mad about hunting, but my real lunacy is the sea. Give me a yacht—a schooner, sailing of course, I hate steam—and I shall adore you."

"Helen!" reproachfully.

"More than I do now, if that be possible."

"I will write to the builders this evening, and ask them to send me drawings and estimates for the handsomest two-hundred-ton schooner they can build."

"Two hundred ton! Oh, Adrian, you are only too adorable."

He smiled at her eagerness, her childish delight in the pleasures she loved. She had taken his gifts of jewellery

almost with indifference, pleased with the glitter and dazzle at the first opening of the cases, but seeming to care very little to ornament herself with her spoil.

"They never look so lovely as in their velvet beds," she said.

Perhaps she knew that a limp white gown and a cluster of Dijon roses were enough for her fresh young loveliness, that neither gems nor gold could add to her beauty.

And so things went on to the end of the hunting season. Adrian spent a great deal of his time at Morcomb, and the sisters came very often to lunch or afternoon tea at the Abbey. There were dinner parties also at both houses.

Morcomb was much gayer than it had been before the advent of Major Baddeley. If not brilliant himself—and it appeared to Sir Adrian that he was a good-natured dullard—Frank Baddeley was the cause of brilliancy in others. The house brightened at his coming. He seemed to be popular with his friends, for two of them came all the way from London, with a string of horses, and put up at the old-fashioned family inn by Chadford Bridge, in order to be near him.

These two gentlemen were Lord St. Austell and Mr. Beeching, and their appearance in the hunting field was not without interest to the native mind.

The Miss Treduceys had met St. Austell "in society," and knew all about him. Sir Nathaniel had been at Eton and Christ Church with his lordship's father. It was almost a kind of cousinship. Matilda affected to know the gentleman's history from his cradle.

"The St. Austells have gone to Oxford for centuries, but this one is a Cambridge man. He was at Trinity, and went out a low wrangler," she said. "He went into Parliament directly he left college. People thought he was going to distinguish himself, but when his father died he went wrong somehow—racing, I suppose—and he quarrelled with his wife. I believe it was *she* who ran away from *him*, but I've heard my father say he drove her to it, so one couldn't help feeling sorry for her, especially as she was Lord Helvellyn's daughter—and we knew her people. They were not divorced—and she went to live abroad with an old aunt."

This to Dorothy Toffstaff, who listened inwardly writhing. It was hard to be so instructed, when as a young lady aspiring to be in Society she ought to have known all about Lord and Lady St. Austell.

"I believe my father knows him," she said carelessly. "I fancy I have heard these old stories."

But it was made clear presently that Mr. Toffstaff, who was sitting on the roadside in his mail phaeton, pretending to criticize the appearance of the hounds, did not know Lord

St. Austell, for there was Mr. Beeching introducing Toffstaff to that nobleman.

Toffstaff and Beeching were old friends. Toffstaff had made his money out of colonial produce in the days when fortunes were to be made in Mincing Lane. The Beeching family had grown rich on the Stock Exchange. Mr. Beeching knew all about the money market, but he had never soiled his fingers with scrip. The Beeching fortune had been growing and quadrupling itself for three generations, since Beeching, grandfather, had made his great coup in the railway mania year. Joseph Beeching was an only son, and was reputed to be fabulously rich. His wealth was a standing joke among his particular friends. He did not mind being chaffed about his millions. He took the thing quite calmly.

"Hang it all, you know, a fellow can't help it if he comes of a money-making ancestry. I know its deuced vulgar to have plenty of cash now-a-days. One ought to be ruined. Every gentleman is hard up. To own oneself rich is to confess oneself a cad; only I'd rather be a rich cad than a poor cad, if it's all the same to you."

Lord St. Austell and Mr. Beeching were received at Morcomb with the open hand of friendship. Colonel Deverill had an Irishman's ideas of hospitality, and considered it his duty to receive all comers, in and out of season. The entertainment might be of a somewhat scrambling and slovenly order, the dinner might be very good or very bad—a feast or a famine, as the Colonel said; the wine might be abundant or the last bottle out of the cellar. The Colonel was equally at ease among his guests, and equally delighted to have them round him. What he wanted most, perhaps, was an excuse for enjoying himself and forgetting black care.

No house could be well conducted where the going and coming was always an uncertainty, and the number of guests at dinner a riddle that was only solved when they sat down. Neither Leo nor Helen pretended to any talent for housekeeping; they left everything to Donovan, the butler, and to an old Irish cook and housekeeper who had been in the Colonel's service ever since his marriage, and from whom he had no secrets.

Lord St. Austell rode by Mrs. Baddeley's side when the hounds moved off, while Major Baddeley followed, in conversation with Dorothy Toffstaff, who was social and loquacious. Mr. Beeching rode alone, and talked to nobody. He was not a particularly agreeable looking young man. He had a low forehead, a pug nose, a large jaw, and altogether too much of the bulldog type for beauty; and his dark sallow countenance and sullen expression contrasted curiously with St. Austell's delicately fair skin, blue eyes, and pale auburn moustache. St.

Austell had the air of having just stepped out of a picture by Sir Peter Lely.

Miss Toffstaff was extremely gracious to Major Baddeley, but she was debating in her own mind all the time how she could easiest get at St. Austell, who must be captured at once for display at Wilmington. It was not to be endured that there should be a nobleman in the neighbourhood who was not an intimate of the Toffstaffs.

"Father must ask him to dinner immediately," she thought, "even if we are obliged to ask the Morcomb people too."

CHAPTER X.

CHANGEFUL AS THE WIND

The Lamb at Chadford was a spacious old-fashioned family inn and posting-house, with long passages, low-pitched rooms, a garden, and a pretty view from almost every window. The garden was on the banks of the Chad, and the house stood close to the bridge, and commanded a winding reach of the river, the hilly high street, and the old Norman church whose chimes marked the progress of the hours for those who lay at the Lamb.

Lord St. Austell and Mr. Beeching shared the prettiest sitting-room of the inn, a room with a bow window facing the bridge and the town, and with two other windows opening on to a balcony above the garden and the river. They sat in this balcony after breakfast, smoking their cigars and hearing the dip of the oars as a boat went slowly by in the morning sunshine. But neither St. Austell nor his friend spent much of their time at the Lamb. Colonel Deverill was too hospitable to leave his son-in-law's friends to mope at an inn. They were welcome at Morcomb at all hours, and were to be found there at all hours. With Beeching's five horses and St. Austell's three, there was always an animal of some kind to carry the two young men to Morcomb, or they would ride home with Mrs. Baddeley after the kill, and have their dress clothes brought over to them by a valet.

"We might almost as well be living here altogether," said St. Austell. "I think we must be more trouble than if we were in the house."

Mr. Beeching said nothing. He accepted everything tacitly, almost as if it were his due. He was the most unemotional young man Colonel Deverill had ever encountered. He was

polite and accommodating enough in social intercourse, but he was—or seemed to be—as cold as a stone.

"I can't think what you can see in him to like," the Colonel said to St. Austell one night, in the confidence of the smoking-room.

"I don't see anything in him, and I don't like him particularly."

"Well, then, put it in another way. I can't think how you can get on with him so well."

"Oh, I can get on with anybody, from Satan downwards. That's my temperament. Beeching is a useful person to know. He has a capital stud, which his friends use pretty freely. His drag and his yacht are good and serviceable; and he has a kind of table d'hôte at his chambers which we all use. In fact, he does whatever we want, and makes no fuss about it."

"I shouldn't think he would make a fuss about anything—not if you cut his head off. I never saw such an unimpressionable young man!"

"Oh, I don't know about that. Still waters run deep, you know. I have an idea there are depths under that dulness of Beeching's. He is not a fool, and I believe he could be a blackguard."

So much for Joseph Beeching from his dearest friend's standpoint. There was a link between the two which St. Austell had not taken the trouble to explain. They were partners in a racing stable. Beeching found the money, St. Austell the intellect and social status. St. Austell had got the commoner into the Jockey Club, and into a certain fast and furious set in London, which esteemed itself the very cream of Society—a set on which royalty had been known to smile, and every member of which was on the high road to moral or financial ruin.

Sir Adrian Belfield saw a great deal of the two men. He liked St. Austell, who was eminently likeable, and never showed the cloven foot except to his intimates; but he did not like Mr. Beeching, still less did he like his future sister-in-law's manner with that young gentleman.

It was not that Mrs. Baddeley openly flirted with him, or encouraged his attentions. She only allowed herself to be worshipped by him; let him follow her about like a dog, and screw himself insidiously into the chair nearest hers on all occasions.

She had a charming air of being totally unconscious of his admiration, and almost ignored his presence; and yet Adrian felt instinctively that she knew all about him and his feelings for her, and that she tacitly permitted his adoration.

"I wonder Baddeley doesn't see what is going on and give his wife a hint," thought Adrian.

But Frank Baddeley was one of those easy-tempered medio-

crities who never do see what they ought to see; men who, so long as they have good dinners, and good horses to ride, and pretty wives to smile upon them, think that life is as it should be. It never occurred to Frank that a wife who was so invariably complacent could hardly be seriously attached to him. He never asked himself whether love would not have been more exacting and more fitful in its manifestations—whether that monotony of sweetness might not mean indifference. He was a sleepy kind of man, fond of commonplace pleasures, and not on the alert to find a thorn among his roses.

He had been a little perplexed by his wife's display of jewellery one evening, and had questioned her about it as they drove *tête-à-tête* in a fly to a dinner at the Abbey.

"Where did you get those diamonds, Leo? You hadn't them in India. You had to borrow some jewellery for the ball at Government House."

"No, I left them with father. They are my grandmother's diamonds—old Lady Ledbury's, don't you know."

"Oh, she left you her jewels, did she?"

"Some of them. I was her god-daughter."

"Ah, to be sure. But you've had them re-set, I suppose. They don't look a bit old-fashioned."

"No; they are just as they came to me. Diamonds are never old-fashioned."

He asked no more questions, perfectly satisfied with the explanation; but that night, when the sisters went home after the dinner party, Leo followed Helen to her room.

"Helen, I want you to do me a favour."

"What is it, dear?"

"You know the old garnet necklace Lady Ledbury left me?"

"Of course I do; but you never wear it."

"I told Frank she left me diamonds. Don't let the cat out of the bag, that's a darling. I didn't want him to know that I had bought them out of the money I won backing horses last spring. He mightn't like me to bet."

"Of course he wouldn't like it. No, I won't betray you. But if I were you, Leo, I wouldn't tell my husband lies. It can't answer long."

"Wait till you have a husband of your own before you sermonize. Anything for a quiet life, Helen. That is my motto."

Adrian and Helen were to be married in June—the first of June. The date had been fixed, the trousseau had been put in hand under Mrs. Baddeley's instructions. A forewoman from one of the most modish houses in London came down to Morcomb to measure Miss Deverill for her gowns.

"I am afraid my things will cost a lot of money, Leo," Helen said doubtfully; when this Parisian personage was gone with her pattern boxes.

"They will cost a goodish bit, but we are not ordering many gowns, you see. Those we have chosen will be lovely; but there will be none to hang idle in your wardrobes, getting dusty and old-fashioned, as some brides' gowns do."

"But the prices seem enormous. Will father be able to pay for them?"

Mrs. Baddeley made a wry face, which expressed doubtfulness on this point.

"Some one will have to pay," she said.

"Not Adrian. You will not let him ever see those bills."

"Adrian's wife, perhaps. Mrs. Ponsonby will not press for her money, knowing what a good match you are making."

"But to let Adrian pay for my wedding clothes, directly or indirectly, would be so degrading, so humiliating!"

"My dear child, you can't be married without clothes, and it's my opinion your father has not a stiver."

"I wish I could win money on the turf, Leo, like you."

Mrs. Baddeley reddened at the allusion.

"Oh, that is all very well once in a way: a mere fluke. It is not to be thought of."

"But you always seem to have money for everything. If Frank were a rich man you could not dress more extravagantly."

"My dear child, I am awfully in debt. I dare not think about my affairs. They are horribly entangled. But you are such a lucky creature. What can it matter who pays for your trousseau, or when it is paid for? Adrian has offered the most liberal settlement. You will have six hundred a year to do what you like with."

"Six hundred! It seems a great deal. I shall be able to help you, Leo."

"You are very good, darling; but I hope I shall never be obliged to sponge upon you. Women were not made to prey upon each other. Man is our natural quarry."

As the days went by and the hunting season drew to its close, it seemed to that acute observer, Lord St. Austell, to whom the study of a pretty woman's sentiments was more interesting than any other problem, that Helen Deverill had not quite so happy an air as she ought to have had, considering that she was soon to be married to the man of her choice, and the very best match in the neighbourhood. It interested that student of character to perceive that the young lady had often a pre-occupied manner, even in her lover's society, as they sat

side by side in a corner of the drawing-room after dinner, or loitered in the billiard-room at dusk.

"She never seems pre-occupied when the brother is showing her the way across the moors," said Lord St. Austell.

He had watched those two riding together across the rough broken ground on the moor, over hillock and hollow, their horses neck and neck, the riders full of talk and happy laughter, enjoying sky, landscape, rapid movement, everything, as it seemed to St. Austell, as he passed close beside them, or followed in their track. Little gusts of laughter were blown towards him on the keen, moorland air.

"How well you and your future brother-in-law suit each other," he said to Helen one day, when they were out with the hounds.

She crimsoned, and was suddenly speechless.

"He really is a fine fellow, and I don't wonder you like him: but a very rough diamond as compared with his brother, I should say."

"Yes," she faltered, "Adrian is ever so much more accomplished."

"Musical, artistic, highly cultured, a young man in a thousand," pursued St. Austell, cruelly persistent. "I believe you are quite the luckiest young lady of my acquaintance, Miss Deverill."

She was silent; all the happy light had gone out of her face. Lips and eyes were grave and mute. St. Austell watched the downcast face with a deepening interest. He thought he had never seen a lovelier countenance, and he was a man who worshipped beauty.

"I used to think her sister the most beautiful woman I ever met," he said to himself, "but this one is lovelier. There is more of the wild rose—the pure and delicate perfection which blooms and dies in a day. To be true to her type, this girl ought not to live to be thirty. And she does not care a rap for Sir Adrian Belfield, and she is over head and ears in love with his brother. A troublesome complication in the present stage of affairs. She should have waited till she was married."

Adrian was not jealous either of Lord St. Austell, whom he admired, or of Mr. Beeching, whom he disliked: but the atmosphere of Morcomb was not agreeable to him after Major Baddeley's arrival. The house had too much the tone of bachelor shooting quarters. Every room was steeped in tobacco; for although men were supposed not to smoke in the drawing-room or morning-room, there were so many exceptions to that rule, and Mrs. Baddeley and her sister were so ready to rescind it upon all occasions, that, practically, there was

smoking everywhere. Cigarettes and whisky and water were the pervading atmosphere. Whatever the hour or the occasion there was generally a little table lurking in a corner with a brace of spirit decanters and a siphon. The talk, too, had the same masculine flavour, and ranged from the stable to the kennels, from billiards to baccarat. Reminiscences of high play in London clubs or foreign casinos were a favourite topic; and the sharp things that had been done on the turf by men of high standing afforded a perennial source of interest.

The sisters seemed in no wise out of their element in this barrack-room society. They spent their days in idleness, sat about among the men, first in one room and then in another; played billiards, pool, or pyramids with skill and success, asked no points from any one, and pocketed a pool with the easiest air in the world.

To Adrian the whole thing was hateful. He could not tell Helen that her father's house and manner of living were detestable, nor could he ask her to live a life apart under her father's roof, or to put on an air of exclusiveness which would provoke ridicule. All he could do was to try and get her away from that obnoxious abode.

He came one morning charged with a letter from his mother.

"Dear Helen,

"Adrian wants you here again, and I want you almost as badly. I lost my new daughter just as I had learned to feel that she was a part of my existence. Come back, dear. You have had quite enough hunting and excitement of all kinds since you left us. Come back and learn to reconcile yourself to the quiet life and the grave old house that must be yours in the future. However happy you may be in the old home with your father, dear, I think it must be better for you to be in your new home with your mother.

"Ever your affectionate,
"C. B."

"You made her write this, Adrian."

"Made her! My mother is not a woman to be made to write what she does not feel, Helen. You should know her well enough by this time to know that."

"Oh, but I believe she would make any sacrifice for her son."

"There is no sacrifice. She really wants you."

"She is too good, too sweet to me. How shall I ever repay her?"

"You will come, won't you?"

"Of course I will come. This letter is a command. Yes, I shall like to come," she added eagerly. "I have had more than

enough hunting, and this house is hateful since Frank's return."

"I am so glad. I feared you liked the life."

"No, I am used to it, and the days go by somehow. I shall be very pleased to get away from home."

Mrs. Baddeley was not so pleased at losing her sister.

"You put me in a false position," she said. "It won't be very nice for me to be the only woman among all these men."

"I thought you only cared for men's society. I have never known you to cultivate women."

"That was because I had you. Sisters can go anywhere and do anything. But now I suppose I shall have to take up with an outsider. Perhaps one of those Treducey girls would answer. They seem to like flirting with St. Austell, though he's a detrimental."

CHAPTER XI.

A DANGEROUS PILOT

Lady Belfield came next morning to fetch her future daughter-in-law, and Colonel Deverill was not displeased to see his younger daughter carried off to a haven of safety. He had a vague idea that the billiard-room at Morcomb was hardly the best place for an engaged girl, and that a kind of society which was all very well for Helen Deverill was not good enough for the future Lady Belfield.

"It is a capital match, and it would be a deuced pity to burke it," thought the Colonel.

So Helen drove away in the roomy barouche, sitting by Lady Belfield's side, with Adrian seated opposite. She seemed pleased to go with them, and she had a quieter and more thoughtful air, which charmed her lover. That chastened and softened manner seemed only natural to a girl on the eve of a new life: a girl for whom the responsibilities of womanhood were so soon to begin.

It was early in April, the hedgerows were budding in the soft Devonian air, and there were violets nestling here and there along the grassy banks. The final meet of the foxhounds had been advertised, and people were beginning to put up tennis nets on asphalte courts, and to talk of the otter hounds that were to be out in June.

Lady Belfield was delighted with Helen's more thoughtful mood. It seemed to bring them nearer together. They sat

together, and worked and talked in the quiet morning hours; and in the evening, when Valentine had carried his brother off to the billiard-room, Constance Belfield would sit down to her beloved piano and play; while her young companion sat on a low chair close by, listening, thinking, or dreaming, with her work-basket standing by untouched, or her book open in her lap.

That dreaming mood was a new phase in Helen's character. On her former visit she had been all gaiety and lightness, full of movement and fitfulness.

The mother loved to talk of her sons, and she found a sympathetic listener in Helen. She talked of both, but she talked most of Valentine; of his errors and failings, his wildness, recklessness, follies of all kinds; but somehow or other the result of all the mother's talk was to prove that wayward son the most brilliant and lovable of young men. Unconsciously, that favouring love pleaded for him, and spread a gloss over all the dark spots in his character.

"I am sorry you and he are not better friends," said Lady Belfield, after one of these conversations.

"Oh, but we are excellent friends. Mr. Belfield was very kind to me out hunting. He was my pilot through some of our best runs."

"A dangerous pilot, I fear, child. But you are so very distant to each other."

"Are we?" faltered Helen. "Perhaps we have very little in common except our love of fox-hunting. Mr. Belfield cannot care to talk to an inexperienced girl."

"Oh, but I think it is you who keep him at a distance. You might be a little more sisterly in your manner."

"I'll try," said Helen, "but as I never had a brother, I hardly know how brothers are to be treated."

"If you liked him there would be no difficulty," answered Lady Belfield, reproachfully.

Helen hung her head and said never a word.

Constance Belfield had been struck by something strange in her son's manner to his brother's betrothed, and in her manner to him. There was not that frank, easy friendliness which the mother would have liked to see; and, knowing Valentine's difficult temper, she foresaw trouble in the future.

The Abbey belonged to Lady Belfield for her lifetime, but it had been agreed between Adrian and his mother that he and his wife were to live there, and to be master and mistress in all things. Constance Belfield would slip into the second place. She could lead her quiet intellectual life just as happily as queen dowager as she had done when she was queen regnant. She would have her own rooms, and her own occupations, her own old friends.

"Everybody will naturally look to your wife as the principal personage in this house," said Lady Belfield. "It would never do for her to be secondary in anything. She had better begin as sole mistress. She will fall into her place more naturally, and fill it better in the days to come. With such a housekeeper as Mrs. Marrable, she can have no difficulties. As for myself, I shall be quite happy when I am no longer sovereign. And I shall not be too continually with you. I am contemplating a cottage by the sea, somewhere on the north coast of Cornwall—a wild, lonely spot—where I can take an occasional rest from all society."

"Dear mother, do you suppose I could ever have too much of you, or Helen either. She will look to you for help and counsel in all things. And when you start your Cornish cottage, it must be big enough for all three of us."

"I have only one difficulty about the future, Adrian."

"What is that?"

"Your brother Valentine has been used to think of this house as his home."

"And it will be his home still, after I am married. There will not be the slightest lessening of his freedom. You know what he and I have been to each other, and that I could hardly live without him."

This was satisfactory, but Lady Belfield had a lurking dread of evil. She could not help thinking that there was a silent antagonism between Valentine and Helen. There was such a chilling reserve in their manner towards each other; they seemed so scrupulously to avoid all occasions of friendly companionship. Valentine seemed to take a diabolical delight in withdrawing Adrian from the society of his betrothed. There was always an excuse for carrying him off somewhere in the morning; and in the evening there was the billiard-room, which at the Abbey was an exclusively masculine apartment. Valentine smoked there, and smoked furiously. He kept his guns and single-sticks there, his foils and fencing apparatus, and had contrived to stamp the room with his own individuality. The billiard-room was as much his peculiar den as the library was Adrian's.

Madge had been more than three months at the Abbey, and she had given no reason for fault-finding in either Mrs. Marrable or the upper housemaid. She had worked well, and had shown herself quick and clever in learning the duties of domestic service. She was very quiet in her demeanour, kept herself to herself, as the other servants said, and was not good company. She had a little room of her own in the great gabled roof, a room with a dormer window that overlooked the wooded valley and that broad deep stream which was the chief glory of Bel-

field Park. She would stand for an hour looking out of this window, far away over the valley to the distant moorland, thinking or dreaming, just as Helen sat thinking or dreaming in the drawing-room below stairs, lulled by the pathetic melodies of Beethoven or Mozart, or by soft, sad, wordless songs by Schumann or Schubert.

In the heart of each girl there dwelt a profound sadness, a yearning for escape from the actual into the unreal.

Madge had seen Valentine but few times since their conversation in the corridor, and their meetings on those occasions had been accidental and brief. The girl would have passed him without a word, without a look even; but on their latest meeting Valentine was in a conversational humour, and he stopped her with a strong hand upon her arm.

"Well, Madge, how are you getting on?"

"Very well, thank you, sir."

"Sir. That's rather formal, ain't it?"

"No, sir. You are a gentleman, and a stranger."

"A stranger. Come, Madge——"

"I told you I could be nothing to you if I wasn't to be your wife. I could never be that, you said—so there it ended. Can't you understand that?"

She spoke as deliberately as a man of business who wants to be decisive and definite about a business matter: she looked him in the face as resolutely as a man looks at a man.

"No, I can't," he answered doggedly. "What devilish hard wood you are made of, Madge. I never met a woman like you."

"I know my own mind. Some women don't know even as much as that. There's one in this house that doesn't, anyhow."

"What do you mean?" he asked, angrily.

"No need to say. You know well enough. Good afternoon, sir. I'm too busy to stop here talking."

She made him a courtesy, and left him, left him brooding, with his head down and his hands in the pockets of his shooting jacket.

The corridors at Belfield Abbey were places to live in: low and wide, with Tudor windows deeply recessed, and provided with cushioned seats, on which a man might loll at full length. There were old pictures, old china jars, old cabinets to break the monotony of the long straight passages; there were thick damask curtains to keep out the cold.

"Trust a jealous woman for scenting a rival," muttered Valentine, flinging himself upon one of those comfortable window seats, and taking out his cigar case. "Yet I thought I had kept things very dark, and that no one but my angel herself knew the state of the case. She knows. She knows,

I'll swear. I've seen it in her face when we rode over the break-neck ground together. Once when I was leading her across a stone wall that might mean broken bones, I looked back as my horse rose for the leap, and saw her eyes. They said as plain as words can speak, 'I don't care if I follow you to your death.' Yes, I saw the love-light in those eyes, and I knew she was mine. Poor Adrian. He's so absurdly fond of her that it seems a pity to come between them; and she hasn't a stiver, and it will be altogether a wretched match for me. I certainly ought to fight it out, and give her up."

The third week in April began with south-west winds and sunny skies. The old oaks and beeches in Belfield Park seemed to smile in the sunshine, though not a leaf showed upon their rugged branches. But there was the purple of ripening leaf-buds, there was the warmth of reviving nature, even in things that seemed dead.

It was glorious weather for tennis, and everybody at Chadford and in the neighbourhood seemed to be seized with a tennis mania. All the young men and women put on flannel garments, and met at each other's houses, and played with all their might and main.

There was no tennis club at Chadford. There had been talk of such an institution, but no one had been enterprising enough to set the thing going; so play on private lawns, and tea drinkings after the play, were eminently popular. Valentine excelled at tennis, as at all athletic games; so directly the hunting was over, he had the ground marked and the nets out, and invited Helen to play with him. They played all the morning, and a messenger was sent to Morcomb to invite Mrs. Baddeley and Mr. Beeching over for the afternoon.

"Do you know, that surly fellow, Beeching, is a crack player?" said Valentine, at lunch.

"I'm rather sorry you've asked him over, however good he may be," answered Adrian. "I dislike him intensely, and so I think does Helen."

"He certainly is no favourite of mine," agreed Helen, "but Frank seems deeply attached to him. Frank has always some friend of that kind, without whom he seems hardly able to exist."

"Oh, but one doesn't ask for a certificate of character from a man who is wanted to play tennis," said Valentine contemptuously. "All I ever inquire is, Can the fellow play, and will he help me to keep up my form? There's no use in playing against one's inferiors."

Helen and Valentine went off to the lawn again directly after lunch. It was hardly weather for sitting in the garden yet, or

Adrian would have sat by and watched the play. As it was, he strolled up and down an adjacent path with his mother, stopping now and then to look at the players.

"How well she plays, and how graceful she is," said Lady Belfield, watching the slim, girlish figure in a simple cream white gown.

"Yes; she is like Valentine. She excels in all outdoor sports, in all games of skill. She plays billiards better than many young men, and she rides better than any woman I know. She is just the wife for a country squire. I only wish I were better fitted for making her happy."

"My dearest Adrian, how can she fail to be happy with you, who are so kind and good to her?"

"Ah, but goodness doesn't count for very much in this life. People would rather have congenial tastes. It is a constant trouble to me that I cannot share the pleasures Helen loves—that if we are to be much together by-and-by, as man and wife, she may feel like a snared bird in a cage."

"She will never feel that if she loves you."

"Oh, I know that she loves me. I have been sure of that from the first; but I don't know if I am right in accepting the sacrifice she will have to make in marrying a man who may be always something of an invalid—forbidden to do this and that—a dull companion for a high-spirited girl."

"But as a wife her whole nature will undergo a change. You will not have a high-spirited girl to deal with, but a woman, full of loving care and womanly thoughts."

"Do you think so?" he asked wonderingly. "Will not that be asking too much of her—that she should pass all at once from girlhood to womanhood, from the holiday of life to the bearing of burdens. She is so bright a creature; she does not seem made for thoughtfulness or care."

"Oh, but she has been much more serious of late. I have seen a marked change in her."

"Yes, she is certainly more serious."

A ripple of girlish laughter came like a mocking commentary upon his words. Helen and Valentine were finishing a single sett, in wild spirits.

"You play as if you were bewitched," said Valentine, when they had finished. "I never saw such strokes from a bit of a girl like you."

Mrs. Baddeley and Mr. Beeching appeared upon the lawn at this moment—the lady in a terra-cotta tailor gown, which would do for tennis or anything; the gentleman in flannels. They would only stop to shake hands and say a few words to Lady Belfield, and then began a double sett, with Valentine and Helen on the same side.

Mr. Beeching distinguished himself at tennis, and behaved rather nicely at tea. He unbent considerably, and showed a somewhat boyish simplicity which pleased Lady Belfield. Mrs. Baddeley was superbly patronizing to the three young men, allowing them to wait upon her and administer to her appetite for pound-cake and chocolate biscuits. It was arranged that they were to play tennis on the Abbey lawn every afternoon until Lady Belfield gave them notice to quit.

"I am not likely to do that," said that lady. "I am very glad for Helen to be amused. Her life here has been somewhat dull hitherto."

The tennis afternoons were highly appreciated. Jack Freemantle and his sister Lucy were invited, and came frequently. The Miss Toffstaffs and the Miss Treduceys put in an appearance; and Major Baddeley sometimes drove over to the Abbey, not to play—he was too lazy for that—but to fetch his wife.

"I am bound to show my allegiance occasionally," he said; and people agreed that the Major's devotion was altogether occasional.

He was a large, placid man, with a broad, good-tempered face—a man who liked to take everything easily, and to whom dinner was the leading event of every day. He admired his wife as much as it was in his power to admire anybody, but he had never known what it was to feel a pang of jealousy. He had far too high an estimate of his own merits, and had never met with a better fellow than himself. He was very particular as to what kind of champagne he bought or drank, but he was not over-choice in the selection of his friends. So long as they amused and served him, he never stopped to consider whether they might or might not be worthy associates for his wife. In a word, he was frankly and unconsciously selfish.

Lord St. Austell had vanished from Chadford with his hunters at the end of the season, but Mr. Beeching and his string of horses still remained at the Lamb, and there was no talk of his departure.

CHAPTER XII.

TOTAL SURRENDER

All Helen's seriousness seemed to have taken flight, as if blown away by the balmy west wind. Once more she was gay and volatile, for ever on the wing, with a ceaseless vivacity. The

change puzzled Lady Belfield, who liked her daughter better in her serious mood.

"My dear child, you seem as if you were bewitched," she said.

Helen blushed, and was silent for a few moments, then replied, with a laugh:

"I am so glad summer is coming, so glad to be out of doors again! You must not forget that I am a wild Irish girl, and love my liberty."

"I am pleased to see you happy, Helen," answered the mother kindly; and then Helen went back to the tennis-court, and the balls were flying across the net again, and the girl's graceful form was skimming over the grass, swift as the flight of a bird.

She came back to the drawing-room, flushed and excited, at tea time, and then Adrian had her all to himself for an hour or so, while she lolled in a low easy chair, resting from the fatigues of the afternoon, and allowing her lover to wait upon her. She had a prettily deprecating air, as if apologizing for taking pleasure in a sport which had no interest for him.

"It is a foolish, childish game, I dare say," she said; "but it is something to live for."

She did not know how much such a speech as that wounded Adrian, or how much it revealed to him.

He went up to his room to dress for dinner one evening, after having lingered longer than usual in the drawing-room with Helen. She had been out of spirits, fretful, like a child over-tired with play, and he had been soothing her as tenderly as a mother might soothe a wilful child.

He was so deeply in love, that all her failings, her childishness, her triviality, endeared her to him only the more. There was a fascination in her very faults which seemed to be inseparable from her beauty.

Fastened to the pincushion upon his dressing-table he saw a slip of paper, with four words written upon it in a firm round hand—"Somebody is false. Watch."

He felt as a man feels who finds a cobra on his pillow. Who could have dared to put that diabolical scrawl there? Some one in his mother's household—some servant eating his mother's bread—had been black-hearted enough to stab an innocent girl's reputation.

His first impulse was to tear the paper to atoms; his next was to put it in his letter-case, with a view to identifying the writer.

"I will have every one of the servants in the library to-morrow morning," he thought; "and each shall write those four words before my eyes, until I discover the wretch who penned that lie."

Yet to do this would create a scandal. Better that than to exist under the same roof with the venomous traitor who wrote that insult to truth and purity. False! With whom should she be false? What tempter had ever tried to seduce her from the straight line of faith and honour since she had been his plighted wife? Spurn that paper as he might, the suspicion it suggested forced itself upon his mind; haunted him and goaded him almost to madness, as he hurriedly dressed, anxious to be early in the drawing-room, to see Helen again before dinner, to be re-assured by her presence, by the steady light of truth in those lovely eyes.

Not a word would he say to her of that foul slander, that stab in the dark; not for worlds would he have her know of that base attempt to blemish her name. But he wanted to be with her again. Never since the first hour of their betrothal had he been so eager to see her.

It was a little more than half-past seven when he went downstairs, his heart beating impatiently for the sound of the only voice that could give him comfort. There was the sound of the piano in the drawing-room, but not his mother's touch. A modern waltz lightly played; fitfully, as if the player were preoccupied.

He noticed this detail as he opened the door and went in. Helen was seated at the piano at the further end of the room, her head bent over the keys, in an attitude of self-abasement; Valentine was leaning upon the piano, talking to her, his head close to hers, his lips almost touching her hair.

The girl started guiltily at the opening of the door; the man went on talking.

"Say yes," he urged; "say yes."

"Well, yes, if you like," she answered carelessly, and resumed the waltz, which she had stopped for a moment.

She played more brilliantly than usual, it seemed to Adrian, with the spasmodic brilliancy of an indifferent, unscientific player, who has spurts of execution and dash now and then, occasional moments in which the fingers have an unaccustomed precision and power. She played for the next ten minutes—a waltz, a mazurka, a nocturne of Chopin's; all with the same air of being engrossed by the music.

Then she rose from the piano suddenly, and went across the room to Adrian.

"How early you are down!" she said.

"There is nothing strange in that," he answered coldly, "but *you* are not generally so early. What compact were you making with Valentine just now?"

His brother was sitting at a book-table near the piano, reading

a newspaper, and apparently unconscious of anything going on in the room.

"It was about our tennis tournament. We are thinking of a tournament, you know."

"Indeed I know nothing about it. The tournament will be something to live for, I suppose?"

"Oh, Adrian, you never spoke to me before with a sneer."

"Did I not? There must be a beginning for all things."

She stood looking at him stricken, guilty. That light nature might be false, but was not yet skilled in hypocrisy. His mother entered the room at this moment, and he went over to her, taking no further notice of Helen.

His heart was as heavy as lead. Good heavens! What an idiot he had been to need this rough awakening to an obvious bitter fact; what a blind besotted idiot he must have been not to see that which was visible to every servant in his mother's house.

"I trusted her so completely," he said to himself; "I thought her so pure and true."

Pure! True! He could never think her either of these again, after that little scene by the piano. It was so little, yet it had told him so much. The drooping head and arms, the half-despairing languor, as of one who submits to superior will; and Valentine's attitude, his lips so close to her hair and brow, his easy air of mastery.

Not for a moment after that revelation could Adrian doubt that his brother had stolen the heart of his betrothed.

"Nature made him to rule and me to serve," he told himself. "How could I ever hope to be victorious where he could be a competitor. He has beaten me in all things in which men care to conquer. He has left me my books, and my music: a woman's occupation, not a man's. He might have left me my bride. There are women enough in the world for him to subjugate. He might have left her free."

"Watch," wrote the anonymous denouncer. He had not watched; but the discovery had been made; the humiliating truth had been forced upon him; accident had given him the key to that secret accusation.

He had considerable power of self-control, and exercised it this evening. He talked easily and even gaily all through dinner, but the conversation was a trio. Valentine talked much and seemed in excellent spirits, Helen sat silent, and Adrian did not attempt to draw her into the conversation.

"How tired you look, Helen," said Lady Belfield, after an animated discussion upon the news in the papers of the day.

Adrian and his mother were strong Conservatives, but Valentine had taken upon himself the opinions and the arrogance of

an advanced Radical. Hence politics always offered a theme for lively discussion and a little temper. Nothing so dull as a one-opinioned family!

"Yes, I am rather tired," answered Helen listlessly. "The day has been so dreadfully warm."

Adrian went back to the drawing-room with the two ladies. Valentine stopped behind, ostensibly for his after-dinner smoke.

The old mullioned windows were closed and curtained, but a large bay window, which had been added to the drawing-room twenty years ago, both to give more light and as an outlet to the garden, stood wide open to the moonlight and the soft evening air. This modern window was an eyesore to architects and all persons of artistic temperament; but it was very convenient to the dwellers in the room, and it brought Lady Belfield's drawing-room and Lady Belfield's garden into one perfect whole. In summer, people sat indifferently in room and garden, and tea-cups circulated freely between the Persian carpet within and the velvet lawn without.

The day had been one of those precocious summer days that perk themselves up in the midst of the spring, and Helen's complaint of its sultriness was not unfounded. There were two or three small logs burning on the open hearth, for show and not for heat, and Lady Belfield took her accustomed chair, not remote from the hearth; but Helen went at once to the open window, and seated herself on a low ottoman close to the threshold.

The moon was near the full, and all the garden was steeped in light. The girl sat idle, watching the night sky, above the tall cypresses and deodaras that bounded the shrubbery.

Adrian seated himself at his mother's book-table, and took up a volume of biography which had arrived that afternoon. Helen stole a look at him presently, and saw him engrossed in his book. She was not surprised that he should be so, as it was a book he had been particularly impatient to see, and the librarian had been slow in sending it. Lady Belfield, finding the other two silent, had resumed a new German novel which she had been reading in the afternoon. They had been all three seated thus for about a quarter of an hour, when Helen rose quietly and went out into the garden.

Softly as she moved, Adrian heard the flutter of her muslin gown as she passed out. He lifted his eyes from the page which he had been staring at fixedly, without the faintest knowledge of its contents.

"Watch."

He put down his book softly, and went across to the window.

Helen was slowly walking along a path that skirted the lawn. His eyes followed the white-robed figure till it disappeared at a

turn of the path which led into the heart of the shrubbery, where a narrow walk wound in and out among thickets of coniferæ, laurels, and arbutus.

Those shrubberies had been laid out and planted a century before, and had been improved and added to by every new owner of Belfield Abbey.

The ground fell away steeply on the other side of the shrubberies, and there were grassy banks sloping down to a long Italian terrace beside the river.

This terrace had always been a favourite promenade with the ladies of the Belfield family.

Scarcely had the white gown vanished into darkness, when a man's figure skirted the lawn upon the opposite side, and then disappeared in the shrubbery. There was just light enough for Adrian to identify that hurrying figure as his brother Valentine.

He went out, bareheaded, and crossed the lawn to the shrubbery. His quick ear caught the sound of a man's footsteps on the winding path, and with that sound for his guide it was easy for him to follow in the right direction, though there was no one visible in the leafy labyrinth.

Presently, that quick firm step stopped, and then, after a pause, went on with slackened pace. He could guess that those two were now together, walking slowly side by side, the girl's light footfall inaudible amidst the sound of the man's firmer tread.

He knew he was gaining upon them presently, for he could hear their voices at intervals, faint gusts of sound blown towards him on the evening air. He followed to a narrow walk, parallel with the river-terrace, and standing there in the shadow of a cypress saw them on the moonlit walk below him. He was near enough to hear every word, every breath, and he had to control his own hurried breathing lest they should hear him. They were standing by the waterside, she clasped in Valentine's arms, with her head upon his breast, and Adrian could hear her sobs in the stillness, the passionate sobs of a despairing love. Never had his arms so held her, never had her passionate tears been shed for him. They had been like children playing at love. Here was love's stern reality—tears and despair. Valentine's head was bent over the half-hidden face. He was trying to kiss those sobs into silence. And then came the sound of his voice, deep and resolute.

"Break with him, dearest?—yes, of course you must break with him. You were meant to be mine, not his. He has most of the good things in this life. He is the elder born, the honoured and wealthy. But I have you, and I mean to keep you, and hold you against all the world."

"Lady Belfield has been so good to me," faltered the girl's

tearful voice. "She has been so loving—and for me to disappoint her——"

"Who knows that you will disappoint her? She shall love you still, my sweetest—love you all the better perhaps for that which you call treason. Don't you know the secret of my mother's heart, Helen? She does her duty to Adrian, but she gives the lion's share of love to me. She will love any wife who loves me."

"You are cruel to say so," cried Helen, escaping from his arms. "What, are you to have everything and he nothing, he who is so good?"

"He has the estate, and he is Sir Adrian. Do you call that nothing?"

"Yes, nothing, nothing, nothing, if he is not happy. No, I won't betray him, I won't be called a jilt and a hypocrite. I loved him before I knew you. I will try to forget you, and to be true to him."

"Helen, don't be a fool."

He drew her to his breast again, snared her as easily with an unmannerly speech as with the honeyed phrases of a modern Romeo. His influence over her was a thing apart from words. It was the despotic power of a strong man's will, which to a weak woman represents destiny. Adrian stepped lightly down the sloping bank, and stood suddenly beside them. The girl started away from her lover, horrified at being seen by a gamekeeper or some such insignificant person; but at sight of Adrian she clasped her hands before her face and stood motionless, as if she had been turned to stone.

"I did not think myself passing rich, Valentine," he said quietly, as his brother faced him boldly and resolutely, with the defiant look with which he had faced angry college dons and aggrieved authorities of all kinds. "I was like the poor shepherd with my one ewe lamb," laying his hand lightly upon Helen's shoulder, "and you have robbed me of my one inestimable possession."

"Don't talk about robbery," said Valentine, "that's arrant nonsense. Men are the slaves of circumstances in such matters. You bring a lovely fascinating girl into the house where I live, and say, 'She is mine, she is taboo, you are not to fall in love with her.' But I am mortal. I am of a clay that is quicker to take fire than most other clay. I have not been under the same roof for four-and-twenty hours with your privileged young lady, before I am over head and ears in love with her. I don't give myself up without a struggle. I say, No surrender, and try to be as uncivil as I possibly can to the young lady. Helen will bear me out that I was a thorough savage during the earlier part of our acquaintance. And then we hunted together, and

I got fonder and fonder of her, and she—yes, I know she began to get rather fond of me. But she too cried No surrender, and then she took to being uncivil; and then I knew it was all over with us both. Tennis finished us; and you will please to remember, Adrian, that tennis was my mother's proposition, not mine. Poor simple soul, she wanted to see Helen and me more like brother and sister, and she thought tennis might help to bring us together."

"You are laudably candid now," said Adrian. "Would it not have been better to be candid before resorting to a secret meeting like this, and degrading your future wife by a clandestine courtship while she was betrothed to your brother? Would it not at least have been wise to spare her the humiliation of being spied upon by servants?"

"What do you mean?"

"Only that it was some servant or hanger-on in the Abbey who gave me the hint that brought me here to-night."

"One of the servants spoke to you about me, about Helen?"

"No one spoke to me. I found a paper in my room, with a suggestion that there was falsehood, and that I should watch."

"The she-devil," muttered Valentine, between his set teeth.

"What! you know who wrote it?" asked Adrian.

"No, but I can guess; some old busybody. The housekeeper perhaps."

"What! Mrs. Marrable? That good old soul never did anything underhand in her life. But whoever my informant was I am grateful to the hand that lifted the veil. You and Miss Deverill might have left me in my fool's paradise ever so much longer."

"There you wrong us both. Things had come to a crisis to-night, and it would have been our duty to confess the truth to you to-morrow. All I wanted to be sure of was that Helen would give up an ample fortune and the privilege of being Lady Belfield, in order to share the obscurity of a younger brother's position."

"And Miss Deverill has made her choice?"

"Well, I believe she was on the point of making it definitely when you interrupted us."

"I can at least simplify the question," said Adrian, "by assuring Miss Deverill that after what has happened to-night I withdraw all claim upon her fidelity or her consideration. She may hold herself as free as the wind that is moving yonder leaves."

Helen's hands had fallen from before her face, which showed death-like in the moonlight. She tried to take Adrian's hand, but he recoiled from her touch.

"Forgive me!" she cried, with passionate entreaty; "oh,

forgive me, Adrian. I hate myself for my inconstancy, my weakness, my folly. Be more merciful to me than I am to myself. Forgive me!"

"When I can," he answered, and left them without another word.

He had left the Abbey before Helen came down to breakfast next morning, and he left the following letter for his brother:—

"You have shown yourself my superior as a lover, as you have in all other accomplishments in which men wish to excel. I submit to fate, which gave me failure and disappointment as a part of my birthright. I think you have used me ill, and that Helen has used me worse; but it is a quality of my nature to love you, and, even while smarting under the sense of a deep wrong, you are still to me something more than a brother. You are a part of myself. Be as happy as you can, and I will take comfort in my desolation from the thought of your happiness. But above all things make her happy. She is all that is lovely and sweet in womanhood, but she lacks strength of character and stability of purpose, as you have already proved. Bear with her, and be patient with her, as I would have been. Her nature will expand like a flower in the warmth of your love, but it will be warped and withered by unkindness or neglect. I resign her to you as a sacred trust. Let me never have to call you to account for her peace of mind. When once my mind and heart are reconciled to my loss, I shall accept my position as your wife's brother, and shall assume all a brother's responsibilities. Tell Helen I am leaving England in the hope that absence may teach me the lesson of forgiveness. Good-bye."

This was all: but in a letter to Lady Belfield, Adrian explained that he was going to London, whence he would start for Norway, after a day or two spent in preparation for his journey. He meant to spend the summer and early autumn in Norway and Sweden, and thence to go to Vienna, and to follow the Danube southward, and winter in Greece.

"If you should feel tempted to join me during any part of my travels, I would go to Frankfort to meet you, and would adapt my wanderings to your comfort and pleasure. My engagement is broken—suddenly, like a dream from which one awakeneth. All the good fairies were at my brother's christening feast, and one of them gave him power over the heart of woman. He has stolen Helen's love—almost involuntarily, I believe, so you must not upbraid him with treachery. Make the best of the position, dear mother. Do all you can for your younger son and his betrothed, and be assured of my co-operation in all you do."

The letter was a shock to Lady Belfield. Her loyal nature revolted against Helen's treachery. She, who was truth itself, could not understand how any other woman could be false. However her heart might secretly incline to the wayward self-indulgent younger son, her sense of honour and justice were outraged by his triumph.

Helen came into the breakfast-room while Lady Belfield sat with Adrian's letter in her hand. The girl's white face and hollow eyes, with traces of prolonged weeping, made a silent appeal to the mother's pity, but even that remorseful countenance could not lessen Constance Belfield's contempt for the offender.

"I find, Helen," she began coldly, "that I have been looking on at a comedy, and that you had your secrets, while I thought that you were to me as a daughter, and that I knew your heart as a mother knows the heart of her child."

"Do mothers always know?" faltered Helen. "There are things in life that no one can reckon against. Oh, Lady Belfield, forgive me if you can. I can't help your despising me; I don't wonder at it. He has told you how base I have been," with a glance at the open letter, "but indeed if you only knew, if I could ever make you understand how I struggled, how I tried to be good and true, and how my heart went to Valentine in spite of myself. Indeed I tried not to love him—tried to hate him, to avoid him, to shrink from all contact with him, but it was all in vain. From the hour we first met—a fatal, foolish, mistaken meeting on my part, a cruel sport on his—from that hour I was lost, my fidelity to Adrian was shaken, and I began to ask myself if I had ever really loved him."

She flung herself on her knees before Lady Belfield and buried her tearful face in the mother's lap, sobbing heart-brokenly. It was hardly possible to be angry with a creature so bowed down by remorse and the consciousness of her own sin.

"My child, it is the most miserable turn that fate could have taken," said Constance Belfield gravely. "You were all the world to Adrian, and the loss of your love may darken all the best years of his life. He is not the kind of man to recover quickly or easily from such a blow. You will never be all the world to my other son. I have studied them both from their cradles, and know what stuff each is made of. Fondly as I love Valentine, I am not blind to his faults. He has a passionate self-willed nature, and to be loved by him will not be all sunshine. This young head will not escape the storms of life, Helen, if you are mated with my son Valentine. It is your heart that will have to bear the heavier burdens in your life journey, it is you who will have to suffer and submit. Adrian would have subjugated

his own inclinations to make you happy. Valentine will expect you to yield to him in all things."

"I know that he is my master," answered Helen, in a low voice. "If his will were not stronger than mine I should have been true to Adrian. I know that in our life to come I shall be his slave—his fond adoring slave. But I shall be utterly happy if he always loves me as he loves me now."

"It would be hard if that should ever waver, when you have sacrificed so much for his sake. You know that your position as Valentine's wife will be very different from what it would have been as Lady Belfield."

"I have never thought of position—not even when I accepted Adrian. I thought it would be nice to have a home of my own, and to hear no more of debts and difficulties and unpaid rents. That is all I ever thought of from a mercenary point of view."

"Well, Helen, the die is cast, and we must make the best of fate," said Constance Belfield gently. "Adrian is gone, and if we were to ask him to come back he would not come."

"He has gone? So soon," exclaimed Helen.

"Yes; he knew, no doubt, that his presence here would have been an embarrassment to you and Valentine. He leaves you mistress of your own life. And now I think, to lessen scandal, the sooner you and Valentine are married the better. But the first thing is to obtain your father's consent."

"He will be dreadfully angry," said Helen, with a shiver of apprehension.

She was still crouching at Lady Belfield's feet. Her sobs had ceased, but her whole attitude betokened the depth of self-abasement.

"He is a man of the world, and we can scarcely expect him to be pleased."

"I dare not see him," said Helen. "Oh, Lady Belfield, you are so good to me, even in my disgrace. Will you break the news to my father? You have only seen the sunny side of his character. He is dreadful when he is angry."

"I will do all I can, Helen. I will send for him this morning."

"No, no; not so soon. Not to-day. There is no hurry."

"I will not delay an hour, Helen."

Valentine came into the room, carrying himself as easily as if his conscience were without stain. He had received his brother's valedictory letter, and had digested its contents at his leisure. He thought that everything was settling itself in a very comfortable manner, and that there need be no more fuss.

He went over to his mother and kissed her.

"I see you know all about it," he said; "that foolish child has been crying and confessing, and breaking her poor little heart about that which neither she nor I could help."

He took the tone of a master at once, spoke of his newly betrothed with the free and easy air of a husband of five years' standing. There was none of the reverential tone with which a lover usually speaks of his mistress, none of the respect which the worshipper gives his divinity in the early days of betrothal.

"It is all very sad, Valentine," said Lady Belfield, while Helen rose slowly, and went to her place at the breakfast table, downcast, pale, and unhappy-looking.

"Bosh, my dear mother. There need be no sadness about it," answered her son, seating himself before a savoury dish, and helping himself with the air of being in excellent appetite. "I wish you'd pour out my coffee, Helen, instead of sitting there like a statue. Pray, mother, let us have no funeral faces. Adrian is disappointed, I admit, and has the right to feel angry, with us or with his destiny. But he has acted like a sensible fellow, and he is going the right way to get the better of his disappointment. Six months hence I dare say he will be engaged to somebody else; and then you will feel what a simpleton you have been to make a tragedy out of such a very simple matter."

Constance Belfield said no more. She knew her son's temper too well to argue with him. To her mind the whole business was fraught with wrong and folly; but if Valentine's happiness were at stake—if he could be happy this way, and in no other, her love for him forbade her opposition. It might be that in this strong and passionate nature there might be a greater capacity for love than in Adrian's calmer temperament; that Adrian could better bear the loss of his promised wife than Valentine could have borne disappointment in his unreasonable love.

A mounted messenger was despatched to Morcomb directly after breakfast, and Colonel Deverill was with Lady Belfield before luncheon.

The interview was long, and in some parts stormy. Colonel Deverill was deeply indignant. He would have sent for Helen and wreaked his wrath upon her, but Lady Belfield interfered.

"You shall not see her till you are calmer, till you have taught yourself to think more indulgently of her error," she said. "She is in my charge, poor motherless girl, and I am beholden to act to her as a mother."

"She was engaged—engaged herself of her own free will, mark you—to a gentleman of high position, a man of wealth and substance: and without the faintest justification she jilts that estimable, highly accomplished young man to take up with

his brother. She is so false and fickle that she cannot keep steadfast for half a year to the man who has honoured her by his choice. She is a shameless——"

"She is your daughter and my future daughter-in-law, Colonel Deverill."

"Pardon me, Lady Belfield, she was to have been your daughter-in-law, and that connection would have been at once an honour and a source of supreme happiness to me; but I have not consented to her marriage with your younger son. Forgive me if I say that with my daughter's exceptional attractions she ought to make a good match. Beauty rules high in Society just now; a really beautiful girl has the ball at her feet. Now, Mr. Belfield is a very fine fellow, but he is not a good match."

"Your daughter loves him, Colonel Deverill, and she will never be happy with any one else."

"My dear Lady Belfield, you know that is a *façon de parler*. Every girl says as much when she fancies herself in love. I have known a girl say as much six times about six different men. My daughter Helen will have to subjugate her inclinations. She has forfeited a splendid position and stamped herself as a jilt. She has shown herself incapable of managing her own life. It will be my business to look after her in future."

Lady Belfield was silent for some moments. She knew her son's determined character, and she told herself that, once having won Helen's heart, he would find a way of marrying her with or without the father's consent. He was not the kind of young man to submit his inclinations to Colonel Deverill's authority. Opposition would only lead to a clandestine marriage.

"My younger son may not be a good match," she said quietly, after that interval of thought, "but he will not be penniless. He will inherit my fortune."

"May it be long before his day of inheritance, dear Lady Belfield. But in the meantime, if he marries he will have to maintain his wife. Pardon me if I remind you that he can't do that—upon expectations."

"I would make a settlement. I could spare five or six hundred a year."

"You would settle that upon my daughter. A very liberal settlement on your part, and more than a penniless girl like Helen has the right to expect; but if the young people had to live upon it—starvation, or at least genteel penury. I should be sorry to see my pretty daughter fading in a third-rate West End lodging, afraid to accept invitations on account of the expense of cabs, or dying of dulness in a small country town."

"If my son marries, he must turn bread-winner—take up a profession."

"Very good in intention, dear Lady Belfield, but there are so few professions that will take up a young man who has not been bred to work from his fifteenth year. Your son Valentine has a splendid intellect, but I doubt if he will ever earn sixpence."

"Then I must do more for him. Trust me with your daughter's future, Colonel Deverill, and she shall be to me as my own child."

"She is a fool, and I have no patience with her," said the Colonel, pacing the room. "She had as fine a chance as a girl need have, and she flung it away. And now you ask me to reconcile myself to genteel poverty for a girl who might have set the town in a blaze. But you are all goodness, Lady Belfield. You would melt a stone—and I am not a stone, as you might have known nearly thirty years ago. It seems natural that my daughter should marry your son. Such a marriage links past and present curiously together. Please send for Helen."

"You will not be unkind to her—you will not scold," pleaded Constance, as she rang the bell.

"There is no good in scolding. The girl is a fool, and there is no more to be said about her."

Helen came, pale and trembling.

"You have trifled with a good man's affection, and with a splendid position, girl," said her father sternly. "You ought to be desperately in love with Mr. Belfield."

"I love him with all the strength of my heart."

"And were I to forbid you to marry him? What would happen then, do you think?"

"I believe I should die."

"Well, you need not die. You can take your own way. Lady Belfield, I leave everything to you—settlement, everything. I submit myself to you in all things; and as for this young lady, I wash my hands of her and her fate."

CHAPTER XIII.

MAKING THE BEST OF IT

While Lady Belfield pleaded her son's cause with Colonel Deverill, Valentine himself was engaged in a business which had very little to do with Helen's future happiness.

He was trying to find out the writer of the anonymous warning which opened his brother's eyes.

Mrs. Marrable had been his mother's housekeeper for nearly twenty years, and Valentine had been her favourite as a boy. She had indulged all his juvenile whims, and had kept him liberally supplied with preserves and pickles, pound-cakes and Devonshire cream, when he was at the University. Marrable's jams had been a famous institution among the undergraduates who breakfasted with him.

He went to Mrs. Marrable's room this morning under pretence of inquiring about a groom who had been on the sick list; and then, after allowing the housekeeper to enlarge upon the efficacy of her beef-tea and the infallibility of her mutton broth, he asked casually:

"How about that half-gipsy girl my mother took in? Does she get on pretty well?"

"It's a very curious thing, sir, that you should ask that question to-day above all other days," she said. "The young woman worked with a good heart, and did her very best to give satisfaction, up to yesterday. She was a very reserved young woman, and did not seem to be altogether happy in her mind. She was always on the watch and on the listen for what was going on in the drawing-room and library, and such like; seemed to take more interest in the family's doings than it was her place to take; but beyond that I had no fault to find with her. But this morning she did not appear at the servants' breakfast; and when one of the maids went up to her room to see if there was anything amiss with her, she found a letter pinned on her pincushion, and the bird was flown. She had taken some of her clothes in a bundle, I suppose, and had left the rest in her drawers. There's the letter, Mr. Belfield. I took it to the morning-room an hour ago, meaning to show it to my lady; but I thought she looked worried and upset at Sir Adrian's having left home so suddenly; and I made up my mind to say nothing about Margaret for a day or two. Why should I trouble my lady about such an insignificant matter?"

"Why, indeed? I hope she hasn't eloped with my brother."

"Fie, for shame, sir! It's just like your mischievous ways to say such a thing."

"Let me look at her letter."

The letter was fairly written, in a bold hand, more masculine than feminine in character, and there were no errors in spelling:

"Dear Mrs. Marrable,

"You have been very kind to me, and I can assure you I am grateful to you and to all at the Abbey who have been good to a waif and stray like me. I am going to London to seek my fortune in service or in some other employment. You need not be afraid that I am going wrong. I am not that kind of

girl. I believe I am made of very hard stuff, and that I can stand the wear and tear of life. I thank Lady Belfield, if she will allow me to do so, for her goodness to a nameless girl. I shall always remember her with loving gratitude.

"Yours truly,
"MADGE."

"She must be a determined hussy," said Valentine.

"She's a curious kind of girl, but I believe what she says of herself in her letter," answered the housekeeper. "She is not the kind of girl to go wrong."

"Bosh!" cried Valentine, contemptuously. "She goes to London, and she goes to perdition as surely as a raindrop is lost when it falls into the sea. She has gone to look for her mother, I dare say. Her mother went to the bad before this girl was born; and this girl is tired of rusticity and servitude, and has gone after her mother. I wonder you can be humbugged so easily, Mrs. Marrable."

"I know more of girls and their dispositions than you do, Mr. Belfield, and I believe this one is no common girl."

"She may be an uncommon girl, but it will all come to the same in the end," answered Valentine, as he went out of the room.

Lady Belfield had her own way. Valentine was impetuously eager to seal his fate, would not have heard of a long engagement had the impediments to speedy marriage been ever so numerous. Happily there were no impediments. Lady Belfield's private income, inherited from her father, and settled upon her at her marriage with full disposing power, amounted to nearly three thousand a year. She settled six hundred a year upon Helen, with remainder to her children, or to Valentine in the event of his wife dying childless; and she gave her son an allowance of four hundred a year. They would thus have a thousand a year to live upon. Lady Belfield's position as tenant for life of the Abbey and home farm obliged her to maintain a certain state, and her income would henceforward be barely adequate to her expenses; but she knew Adrian's generous temper, and that she would be assisted by him to any extent she might require. They had divided some of the expenses between them hitherto, his purse maintaining the stables and paying his mother's coachbuilder. She had saved some thousands since her husband's death, and had added two or three hundred a year to her income by the judicious investment of her accumulations: all this without detriment to her charities, which were large.

Valentine accepted her sacrifice of income lightly enough, dismissing the subject with brief and careless thanks. He was

living in a lover's paradise, spending all his days with Helen, in the gardens, on the river, on horseback in the early mornings before the sun was too hot for riding; thinking only of her, living only for her, as it seemed.

They were to be married on the tenth of June, just ten days later than Adrian's appointed wedding day.

In a week after Sir Adrian's departure everybody in the neighbourhood knew what had happened, and pretended to know every minutest detail. There were at least six different versions of the breach between Adrian and his betrothed, and not one of them was in the least like the truth. But every account was dramatic, and had a life-like air, and made excellent sport for afternoon tea parties.

Mrs. Baddeley had not been reticent. She had gone about everywhere lamenting her sister's fatuity. "Such a nice marriage, and we were all so fond of Sir Adrian, and to take up with the younger brother. I feel vexed with myself for having ordered such a lovely trousseau. It is far too good."

Happily very few wedding presents had arrived before the change of plan. Those premature gifts were sent back to the donors, with an explanation, and duly came back again to Helen. It was for her pleasure and not for her bridegroom they were given, wrote the givers reassuringly.

Except for those early morning rides, or for boating on the river, Helen hardly left the grounds of Belfield Abbey till she went back to Morcomb at the end of May. She was never in the drawing-room when callers came to the Abbey. She ran away at the sound of the bell, and hid herself somewhere—afraid to face people, who had doubtless condemned her as a jilt and a hypocrite.

"You should brazen it out," said Valentine, laughing at her.

"So I will, when I am your wife. But now it tortures me to think of the way people talk about me."

"I never cared a straw for the opinion of my dearest friend, much less for that of a set of busybodies," said Valentine contemptuously.

It was all over, and Helen was Valentine Belfield's wife. The wedding had been the simplest of ceremonials; no guests had been bidden, and relatives only were present. There were no bridesmaids, and there was no best man. Colonel Deverill, his elder daughter and her husband, and Lady Belfield were the only witnesses of the marriage, save the clerk and pew-opener. The bride was married in her travelling dress, and bride and bridegroom drove straight from the church to the station, on the first stage of their journey to Switzerland, where they were to spend a long honeymoon, moving about by easy stages

as fancy led them, and not returning to England until September.

"Foolish people!" exclaimed Mrs. Baddeley. "They will have more than time enough to get tired of each other."

While they were honeymooning, Lady Belfield was to find a small house at the West End, just fitted to their requirements and their income; such a house as exists only in the mind of the seeker. She was to spend a month in London, in order to accomplish this task, and when the house was found she was to furnish it after her own taste, and at her own expense.

"No wonder they were married in that sneaking fashion," said Miss Toffstaff, when she heard that Miss Deverill's wedding was over. "It shows how thoroughly ashamed of themselves they all are."

"Come now, Dolly, after all, it must be owned that the girl was not mercenary," remonstrated her sister. "It ain't often a girl throws over a rich man to marry a poor one."

"How do you know it was the girl who broke off the engagement? She flirted audaciously with Mr. Belfield, and Sir Adrian threw *her* over. That's the truth of the story."

The Miss Treduceys shrugged their shoulders, and declared they had never expected any good to come of Sir Adrian's foolish entanglement. They talked of it now as an "entanglement," and congratulated dearest Lady Belfield upon her elder son's having got himself disentangled.

"You must be so glad," said Matilda.

"But I am not at all glad. I am very fond of Helen, and I am pleased to have her for my daughter upon any terms; but I had much rather she had proved true to her first love."

"She is very sweet," murmured Matilda, perceiving that it would not do to depreciate Lady Belfield's daughter-in-law, "but I cannot think, from what I have seen of her, that she has much strength of character."

"She has no strength of character," replied Lady Belfield, "but she has a warm affectionate nature, and she will make an admirable wife for Valentine. He has too strong a character himself to get on with a strong-minded wife."

"Yes, I understand. He will have his own way in all things, and she will be like an Oriental wife, Nourmahal, the Light of the Harem, and that kind of thing."

"I believe she will make him happy," said Lady Belfield decisively; whereupon the Miss Treduceys told all their acquaintance that Lady Belfield was very soft about her daughter-in-law, and inclined to be huffy at any word of disparagement.

CHAPTER XIV.

NOT A COMMON GIRL

THE thing which decided Madge upon leaving the comfort and protection of Belfield Abbey for the uncertainties of a great city, with its imminent dangers and possibility of starvation, was a passage in the police reports of that London paper which was most affected in the servants' hall.

"Mrs. Mandeville, of No. 14A, Little Leopold Street, Mayfair, was brought before the magistrates at the Westminster Police Court for attempting to commit suicide by taking oxalic acid. The evidence showed that the lady had been dining with a gentleman who passed in the house as Major Mandeville, but who is supposed to have lived there under an assumed name, and that after dinner a scene of some violence occurred between Mrs. Mandeville and the gentleman in question, in the course of which Mrs. Mandeville rushed from the room, and ran to a cupboard upon an upper floor, where a solution of oxalic acid was kept by the housemaid for the purpose of cleaning lamp-glasses. She drank a large quantity of this solution, and was immediately seized with all the symptoms of virulent poison, and was for some hours in danger of her life. The person passing as Major Mandeville left the house while she was lying in agony. The screams of one of the servants had attracted a police-constable, who entered the house, and took the prisoner in charge as soon as she was so far recovered as to be brought to the station. It was not the first time she had attempted suicide.

"His Worship: And I suppose you had no more intention of dying on this occasion than you had upon your previous attempt. You only wanted to give Major Mandeville a lesson?

"The Prisoner: I wanted to make an end of myself on both occasions. I have been very cruelly treated, and I have nothing in the world to live for.

"His Worship: That is a bad hearing from a person of your attractive appearance.

"The Prisoner: I might have been better off if I had been as ugly as sin.

"His Worship: Is Mandeville your real name?

"The Prisoner: It is the name I have borne for nearly twenty years.

"His Worship: And you think you have a pretty good right to it—a squatter's right. But it is not your real name?

"The Prisoner: I have no real name—not in the Red Book—if that's what you mean. My father is a basket-maker in the country. He was always called John Dawley in my hearing. I never heard that he had any other name."

Hereupon followed a brief lecture from the magistrate, and the prisoner, having promised to refrain from any future attempt upon her life, was finally dismissed in a spirit of half-contemptuous pity upon the part of his worship.

The paper gave the little scene and dialogue in extenso. The offender was a handsome woman, living in Mayfair, and the case was therefore deemed of sufficient interest to be reported fully, with a sensational side-heading, "MAYFAIR MORALS."

The perusal of this report turned the scale of Madge's mind, which had been wavering for some time. She would go to London and seek out her mother, rescue that brand from the burning, if it were in the power of her intelligence and her affection to do as much. It would be something for her to do, some fixed purpose and useful end in life at the least. Here she had neither end nor aim. She despised herself as an impostor and a spy. To watch Valentine from a distance, to see him falling deeper and deeper in love with Helen Deverill, to hear an occasional snatch of talk between those two—words and tones which said so much to that eager ear—to know that whatever fancy he had once had for her was dead and forgotten: all this had been acutest agony: and yet she had stayed on at the Abbey to endure that jealous pain, that bitter humiliation.

The report in the newspapers decided her. She would go to her mother at once, in the hour of her despair. That was surely the time in which a daughter's love might avail most, might mean redemption.

She would go; but before leaving she would launch a thunderbolt. Those two—traitor and traitress—should stand revealed to the man who so blindly trusted them. She wrote her few words of warning, and put the slip of paper in Sir Adrian's room in the twilight, after his valet had laid out his master's dress clothes and made all ready for the evening toilet.

Within an hour of daybreak next morning she had left the Abbey, and was trudging along the road to the station. She had a little money, just enough to pay for a third-class ticket for Waterloo, and to leave her a few shillings in hand. Mrs. Marrable had given her three sovereigns on account of wages to be fixed in the future, when it was decided how much her services were worth in the household.

She had been on trial hitherto, as it were, an apprentice to domestic service. She had taken one of her sovereigns to Mr. Rockstone, and had insisted upon his receiving it as part

payment for the money he had advanced for her clothes. She had given ten shillings to her grandfather on her last Sunday visit to the hovel by the river. She had thus thirty shillings with which to begin the world. What was she to do when those few shillings were exhausted, when she found herself penniless in the great desert of London?

Did she mean to live upon her mother, Mrs. Mandeville, whose West End house might be an abode of wealth and luxury?

No; she had no intention of accepting either food or shelter in that house, which seemed to her as Tophet in little. Mrs. Marrable had said of her that she was not a common girl, and her intentions as to her future life were not those of a common girl.

She was exceptionally strong, and she meant to work for a living, to labour with those strong hands and robust arms of hers, to accept the roughest toil, were it necessary, to earn her bread in the sweat of her brow, and if possible to earn her mother's bread also.

"I will rescue her out of that hell upon earth, if I can," she said to herself. "People can live upon so little if they have only a mind to do it. Bread is cheap, and I have lived upon dry bread before now."

In the basket-maker's household life had been sustained upon the hardest fare. Madge had never seen smoking joints or good cheer of any kind till she went to the Abbey. Her soul had almost revolted against that plethora of food in the servants' hall. She thought of the multitudes who were starving, those seething masses of London poor about whom the Vicar had told her, and she sickened in that atmosphere of plenty. Not by any means a common girl. She thought she had a mission, something to do in this life; and that her first duty was to care for the mother who had never cared for her.

She had been carefully taught in her place in the village school, taught earnestly and conscientiously, by Mr. Rockstone, and she had a stronger idea of duty than many a girl who has been expensively trained by French and German governesses, with occasional supervision from the parental eye. She had taken the Vicar's teaching in her own way; worked it out in her own way; and she was assuredly not a common girl.

She knew that she was handsomer than one woman in fifty. She had looked at herself in the shabby little glass which her mother had bought of a travelling hawker five-and-twenty years before—the blurred and clouded glass which hung against the whitewashed wall in the old basket-maker's cabin—and the reflection had told her that she was beautiful. Those flashing eyes with their long black lashes and arched brows, that rich

olive complexion with its warmth and colour, the perfect mouth and teeth, and beautifully moulded chin, set on to a throat that might have given immortality to marble—these were elements of beauty not to be mistaken or underrated by the ignorance of an inexperienced girl.

She knew that she was beautiful, and in her scanty converse with the world she had learnt just enough to understand that beauty is a rare and wonderful gift, and that her whole future life might depend upon the use she made of it.

Beauty has its price all the world over. What was to be the price of hers? Not shame and infamy, she told herself. Not such a name as her mother had left behind her amongst the villagers, who still remembered and talked of her.

Thus it was that when Valentine Belfield came to the basket-maker's hovel, prepared for easy conquest, he found a woman of a different stamp from other women whom he had admired and pursued in the past. Not so easily did the bird fall into the net of the fowler.

He came upon her unawares one day as she stood at the cabin door, watching his boat drift slowly by with the tide, while he sat lazily reloading his gun. He looked up and saw her at her cottage door, a dazzling apparition.

He put down his gun and took up a boat-hook and pushed in towards the bank, tied his boat to the trunk of a pollard willow, and landed.

He went straight up to the threshold where the girl was standing, and accosted her easily and frankly, asking some commonplace questions about the ground and the shooting. She answered him as freely, looking him full in the face, in no wise abashed by his striking presence or superior rank. She told him all that could be told about the sport on that dreary bit of marsh. And then he went on to talk of other things, and asked her for a light for his cigar, and seated himself on a bench by the door to smoke.

She had seen him in church occasionally with his mother, and had recognized him at the first glance. She was in no wise abashed by his presence. She looked at him fearlessly with those deep inscrutable eyes of hers, which seemed fraught with the mysterious influences of an ancient race. It was he who felt abashed in her presence, as she stood in a careless attitude, leaning against the door post, looking gravely down at him.

He lingered for an hour; went again the next day; and the next, and the next, and so on daily, remaining longer and longer each day, until he reached the limit of safety, and only left just early enough to escape a meeting with the basket-maker. He went as one drawn by a spell. He carried his gun and game-

bag with him every morning, but the birds had an easy time. The only bird he wanted to snare wore a different plumage.

He had practised all the tempter's arts, and yet he seemed no nearer success than he had been when he first stopped his boat, surprised by that sudden vision of low-born beauty. His proffered gifts had been refused with a quiet scorn which was a new thing in his experience. His subtlest flatteries had been resisted with a steadfastness which might be pride or calculation. And yet he thought she loved him; that beneath this strength of character there burned hidden fires. Yes, he had seen her face light up at his coming, and had noted the cloud of sadness when he bade her good-night. Yet to his reiterated prayer that there should be no such parting, that their lives should flow on together in some luxurious retreat, some dainty villa beside yonder river where its banks were loveliest, some hidden haven where they might make their mutual paradise apart from the outer world, she had been as adamant.

She provoked him at last into quarrelling with her. That stubborn persistence roused his worst passions, his pride, his cruelty, his anger against any creature who opposed his will. He upbraided her with her coldness, her selfish, calculating temper.

"You are playing me as an angler plays a fish," he said. "You think that by keeping me at bay, driving me to madness with your cold-hearted obstinacy, you will make a better bargain. It is a matter of exchange and barter with you. If you loved me you would not treat me so."

"Perhaps I don't love you."

"You are a strange girl, with a heart as hard as the nethermost millstone," he answered, and left her in a fit of temper.

Never before had he been so thwarted, never had he been so resolved on conquest. He hardly knew whether he loved or hated her most, that winter evening, as he tramped along the causeway, leaving tell-tale footprints in the clay which were to be frozen hard before to-morrow morning.

He would leave her to her pride and her folly; he would leave her to find out what life was worth without him, once having known the sweetness of his flatteries, the delight of his company. He had a letter from an old college friend in his pocket, a letter proposing a month at Monte Carlo. Yes, he would go; he would forget this gipsy girl, and let her forget him if she could.

He returned from his holiday half cured of his passion for that strange girl, and it was a shock to him, and far from a pleasant one, to find her in his mother's house.

He accepted her presence there as a sign of her complete subjugation. She had risked everything to be near him. He felt

certain of ultimate conquest. She might carry herself ever so proudly, but at heart she was his slave.

Then came an unexpected distraction in the presence of another woman. He began to make love to his brother's betrothed in sport. It pleased him to discover his influence over that weak and giddy nature, like the power of a snake over a bird. Poor little bird, how it fluttered and drooped under the spell, and waited helplessly to be caught. His earlier feelings were those of amusement, flattered vanity only. He did not mean to be disloyal to Adrian. And then arose within him the old thirst for conquest, the hunter's passion for the chase and the kill. It was not enough to have fluttered that foolish heart. He must be sure of victory. His own fancy had been kindled in the pursuit, and he told himself, as he had often done before, that this was the most serious passion of his life. What was fidelity to a brother that it should hinder a man's life-long happiness?

It was seven o'clock in the evening when Madge found herself at Waterloo Station. In her ignorance of railways and time-tables she had contrived to spend a long day upon a journey that might have been easily accomplished in five or six hours. She had wasted hours at various junctions, and it seemed to her that she had been travelling for a week when she alighted amidst the crowd and bustle at Waterloo. She had eaten only a penny roll upon her journey, and she longed for the refreshment of a cup of tea after the dust and heat of the way; but she had to husband her few shillings, and so tramped off, faint and thirsty, in the direction which a policeman had indicated to her as the nearest way to Mayfair.

The nearest way seemed a very long way to that solitary explorer before she had reached her destination, and York Road, Lambeth, gave her a sorry idea of the great city. But when she came to Westminster Bridge the grandeur of colossal London burst upon her all in a moment. She was awed by that spectacle of Senate Houses and Abbey, the broad river veiled in the mists of evening, the long lines of golden lamps. It was all grand and wonderful; but the heavy smoke-laden atmosphere oppressed her. She seemed to lose all the elasticity of her nature, the light free step of the rustic.

It was a weary walk from the bridge to Little Leopold Street, for at almost every turn she had to inquire her way, and the roar of the traffic bewildered her, while every omnibus looked like a Juggernaut car bearing down upon her with murderous intent.

Little Leopold Street seemed a haven of rest after the noise and bustle of the great thoroughfares. It was a quiet little street, lying *perdu* among streets of greater altitude and social

importance. It was an exclusive little street, or gave itself airs of aristocracy, and there were flowers in all the windows. Number 14A was brightened by red silk blinds, behind which lights were shining in drawing-room and dining-room, shining dimly in the dusk. Madge's heart almost failed her as she rang the bell. The house had such an aspect of elegance and luxury, as she waited there, with the perfume of the flowers in her nostrils. Every window was full of flowers. And it was from such a nest as this she was to ask her mother to go out with her into the stony wilderness of London, to toil for daily bread.

She had to remember the dialogue in the police-court in order to give herself courage.

A smartly dressed young woman opened the door.

"I want to see Mrs. Mandeville, if you please," said Madge.

"I ain't at all sure as she can see you. What's your business?"

"You can tell her that I am a relation of hers, and that I have come a long way on purpose to see her."

"You can step inside while I go and ask; but I'm pretty sure Mrs. Mandeville won't be able to see you to-night. She's expecting company."

"Please ask her to let me speak to her, if it's only for five minutes."

"Well, I'll see. You can take a seat while I go upstairs."

Madge entered the hall. It was small, but made important by the artistic trickery of the fashionable upholsterer; white panelling, Japanese curtains, Japanese lanterns, Japanese jars. Madge sat on a bamboo bench, and waited. The door of the dining-room stood open, and she saw a table luxuriously arranged for four people. While she was looking at this bright interior, the table, sideboard, and mantelpiece lighted with wax-candles, and glowing with flowers, the door of a back room was stealthily opened, and a shabby-looking old man with a grimy countenance peered curiously at her, and then withdrew. She had but just time to see a small room, with two candles and a jug and glass upon a table.

Who could that horrid looking old man be, and what had he to do amidst all this smartness and glitter?

The maid reappeared upon the narrow staircase.

"You can step this way," she said, beckoning, and Madge went up to the second floor, wondering as she went at the hot-house flowers on the staircase, the velvet-covered hand-rail, the amber brocade curtains which veiled the large window on the landing.

The servant flung open the door with an angry air.

"She ain't in a state to see any one," she said as she retired, and left Madge standing just within the threshold.

She had never been in such a room before, so gaudily decorated and richly furnished, and so wanton in its disorder. The low French bed was draped with velvet and lace, and the silken coverlet was heaped with things that had been flung there haphazard one upon another. A silk gown, a riding habit, hat, whip, and gloves, a pearl and feather fan, a pair of satin slippers, a newspaper or two, and a volume of a novel. All the chairs were encumbered. There was a Persian cat asleep upon one, a heap of books and newspapers on another, a tea-tray on a third. Mantelpiece and fireplace were draped with point lace, over turquoise velvet. There was a fire burning in the low hearth, and the atmosphere was oppressively hot.

A woman was lying on a sofa in front of the fireplace, her long black hair hanging loose over her white muslin dressing gown. A woman who had once been strikingly handsome, and who was handsome still, even in decay. Her cheeks were hollow, and there were lines upon the low broad forehead, but the large dark eyes had lost little of their splendour, and the finely cut features were unimpaired by time.

The woman who called herself Mrs. Mandeville turned those darkly brilliant eyes upon the intruder with a look of keenest scrutiny. Then slowly, without a word, she rose with languid movements from her sofa, walked across to Madge, and laid her hands upon the girl's shoulder.

She scanned her face, silently and deliberately, as they stood thus, confronting each other. Madge's eyes seemed transfixed by those other eyes, so like her own.

"To my knowledge I have but two relations in the world," said Mrs. Mandeville slowly, "my father and my daughter. Are you my daughter?"

"Yes, mother," answered Madge, with her arms round her mother's neck.

CHAPTER XV.

MADGE WILDFIRE

The mother neither repulsed nor encouraged her daughter's embrace. She let the girl's arms rest upon her neck for a few minutes, while she stood silent, with clouded brow.

"What do you want?" she asked at last.

"Nothing—in this house."

"Why have you come here?"

"For two reasons: first I wanted you, and next I thought you wanted me."

"You thought I wanted you," cried Mrs. Mandeville, with a scornful laugh—that discordant laugh which tells of an habitual assumption of mirthfulness. "Don't you think if I had wanted you I should have gone to fetch you? I knew where you were to be found."

"You might want a daughter's love without knowing your need of her," answered the girl firmly, unabashed by the disorderly splendour of the room, or by her mother's mocking laughter.

She stood before the sinner as calmly as if she had been her guardian angel, sent to her from the Eternal Throne.

"I saw that you had been in great misery and despair," she continued; "I read of your unhappiness in a newspaper, and I felt it was time for me to go to you. The newspaper told me where you lived. It was my first chance of finding you."

"Poor child! And pray what use did you think your coming could be to me?"

"I might help you to make up your mind."

"To make up my mind! About what?"

"About leaving this house, mother dearest; about leaving a home in which you have been so miserable that you would have killed yourself to escape from it. Indeed, indeed, dear mother, there was no need to take that last desperate step. The world is wide enough for every one. Let us go out into it together. You can never be more unhappy than you were when you tried to end your life. You may be happier, guarded by your daughter's love."

"Guarded by you!" exclaimed the other mockingly, yet with a touch of gentleness. "Oh, my poor, loving, forgiving child, what do you suppose you can do for me—you? No; it is all over with me, Madge. You should have kept clear of me—as I have kept clear of you. I might have come after you—might have brought you here—might have shown you London life and its pleasures and finery as I know them; but I was wiser for you than I had been for myself. Any kindness I can try to show her will be poison, I said to myself—better let her starve in the old man's hovel than feast with me. I kept clear of you for your own sake, Madge, though I dare say I seemed a cruel mother. Yes, for your own sake—and a little, perhaps, because I am hard by nature, and have never felt the want of a child's love. No, I may as well be candid. I didn't want you in the years gone by, and I don't want you now. You have done a foolish thing in coming to this house, and the best thing you can do is to get out of it the first thing to-morrow morning, and

go back to Devonshire by an early train—go back, and never tell the old father you have seen me."

"I am not going back. I have come to London for good. I am going to share my life with you. I am strong, and I can work for you—if I can get work to do. If I can't, we can starve together. It will be better than what you were going to do."

"Oh, don't harp upon it like that, girl. Don't ram that odious police report down my throat, or remind me of the devil that brought me to such a pass. I was out of my senses that night. You don't suppose I am always in the same humour, do you?"

"I think your life must have been very unhappy before it came to that."

"Yes; I have been miserable enough by fits and starts; but it has not been all misery. I have been the slave of a bad man—yes, his slave, though before the world he pretended to make me his queen. I have felt the bond wearing thin on both sides—his and mine—have felt that the tie must soon snap; but I have held on, like grim death, rather than let him go. I think as our love has lessened I have grown more determined to hold him, and to prevent his going after any one else. I have made him pay pretty dearly for every insult he has put upon me. It has been pull devil, pull baker; but the baker—meaning me—has sometimes got the upper hand."

She broke into a vindictive laugh as she turned away from Madge, seeming almost to forget her presence. She stood with her elbow on the mantel-board, looking moodily down at the expiring fire.

"No, he has not had things all his own way," she muttered. "I have been a match for him—sometimes."

After an interval of brooding, she turned upon Madge sharply.

"Tell me the truth, child," she said. "I am a woman of the world, not easily humbugged. What brought you here?"

"I have told you my reasons, mother."

"Oh, that's all flummery. I've treated you very badly. I was in low water when I took you back to the hovel where I was reared, or I don't suppose I should have done such a thing. And then afterwards—it was wiser to leave you there. What love can there be between us then? Mother and child! The words are a mere empty sound to you and me."

"Not to me, mother. I have nothing in the world to love—but you. You can have my whole heart if you will. I will be your slave, if you will leave this house and go out into the world with me, trusting in Providence for the rest."

"Have you any money?"

"A few shillings."

"Any home in London?"

"Not yet. We can look for a lodging together."

"The girl is mad."

"Not madder than you were, mother, when you tried to poison yourself," said Madge resolutely. "You confessed that it was not the first time you had tried. And you meant to die, you said. There can be nothing that you and I may have to face together worse than death: and you will at least escape from—shame."

Her voice sank almost to a whisper as she spoke that final word.

"You talk like a book," said the mother, still cynical.

"I talk to you from the depths of my heart," answered the girl. "I had been thinking and wondering about you for a long time before I saw that newspaper. I had yearned for you in the loneliness of my life, and when I saw that, I thought my time had come. I had more than one motive. I hated my life down yonder—hated myself. I wanted some one to work for—some purpose to strive for. I come to you penniless, but not helpless. I am young and strong, and know how to work. Mother, you will trust your life to me, won't you? You were not afraid of death; why should you be afraid of poverty."

"Because it's a great deal worse than death. One means the blowing out of a light; a puff, and all is over. No more pain, no more rage and bitterness. No growing old and ugly, when one has been an acknowledged beauty. Poverty is the smouldering of the candle, burning slowly down in the socket, guttering, flaring, stinking itself out into darkness. Poverty for a woman who has lived as I have lived is worse than a hundred sudden deaths, if one could die a hundred times over by pulling a trigger or tying a noose."

"But, mother, to escape from a bad life—from all that has ever been evil in your life—to feel yourself honest and brave and true. Who would not eat dry bread for the sake of that?"

Mrs. Mandeville did not answer immediately. She began to pace the room, with her hands clasped above her head, her hair streaming over her shoulders, the white round arms bare to the elbows—arms that a girl might have been proud of, arms which had been the admiration of a whole theatre sometimes, when this woman sat *perdue* in her box, one white arm lying on the dark velvet cushion, spanned with diamonds.

She paced the room silently for three or four minutes: and then stopped abruptly, facing her daughter.

"Madge, had you come to me three years ago with such a proposition, I suppose I should have laughed in your face. I was in luck then—this house was just furnished. I had two of

the best saddle-horses in London, and a victoria that took the shine out of half the titled ladies—those straitlaced ones, I mean, who hold their heads high because they have *not* been through the Divorce Court. I had it all my own way just then—yes, I was better off than when I was your age. But things are changed. We have gone too fast, both of us. It's all up, money gone—and love gone with it, girl. You know what they say—when poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window. We never took to quarrelling desperately till he began to lose his money. There is very little choice for me, Madge—death or the workhouse—that's about what it means—unless—unless——"

"Unless what, mother?"

"Unless there should be a pigeon so well worth plucking that the crow can feather his nest again."

"I don't understand you, mother."

"I don't want you to understand me. You ought never to have come here," answered Mrs. Mandeville impatiently.

She was a creature of impulse and whim, having hot fits and cold fits, now all sentiment, anon vulgar almost to brutality, a brilliant uneducated woman, who had seen the world in many phases, and always on its worst side.

She rang a bell violently, and the maid who had admitted Madge appeared so much more quickly than is the manner of her kind, that it might be guessed she had been listening on the landing.

"Has Colonel Mandeville come in?"

"No, ma'am, and cook says the dinner won't be fit to throw in a pig trough."

"She had better serve it decently for all that, if the Colonel should bring the two gentlemen I expect."

"I don't think there's much use in expecting anybody now, ma'am. It's past nine o'clock," the maid answered, with an off-handed air.

"They may come any time before midnight. Let the dinner be kept back somehow, and not burnt to a cinder, as the quails were the last time the Colonel dined at home, tell cook."

The girl went out, slamming the door behind her.

"Madge," said her mother, "if the man I expect is not here before midnight, I will go where you like to-morrow morning."

"Dear mother," cried the girl, trying to caress her.

"Don't touch me! I feel like a tigress. It is not for love of you I shall go, but for hatred of him. Oh, the scoundrel, the relentless scoundrel, to leave me like this in my old age. He told me the other night that I was an old woman, and that was why nobody cared to come to my house. He said that, when it was his shameless cheating at cards that had frightened away all

but the greenest young fools ; and there were not fools enough to serve his turn ; and he rounded on me—his decoy. And he deserts me now, with an execution in the house, and a man in possession, and every jewel and every rag I own stripped from me. And yet there are women who are not half so handsome as I have been, who have saved fortunes and bought landed estates. It is an infamous shame. I will go with you to-morrow morning if things are not set straight to-night. You shall have some supper, and there is a room over this where you can sleep." She put her hand upon the bell, but Madge stopped her.

"Don't, mother," she said resolutely, yet not ungently. "I can't stop in this house."

"You can't ! Why not, pray ? "

"There's no need to say why. I have to get a lodging in the north of London, near the Gray's Inn Road."

"To-night ! Nearly ten o'clock, and you a stranger in London. You must be mad."

"No, I am not, mother. I know where to go, and I don't care how far it is. I shall be here to-morrow morning ; if you won't come with me to-night—at once."

"Go with you to the East End ; to hunt for a room to shelter us—to spend the night in a casual ward, perhaps. A tempting invitation, upon my soul."

"We shall not have to hunt. I have the address of a respectable lodging-house. It was given me by a housemaid at Lady Belfield's, a girl who had been in a factory before she went into service."

"How do you know that there will be room for you in your respectable lodging-house, or that the housemaid told you the truth about its respectability ? "

"She was a good, honest girl, and I can trust her. Mother, why not come with me now ? " urged the girl pleadingly.

No woman's voice had ever addressed Margaret Mandeville with so much tenderness, never till to-night had a woman's arms entwined themselves about her neck. And this girl was her own flesh and blood, her only child, looking at her with appealing eyes, trying to lure her away from the brimstone path. And of late the brimstone path had not been a way of pleasantness.

"No, I must see to-night out," said Mrs. Mandeville, between her set teeth. "I must see if he can be villain enough to abandon me."

"Mother, were you ever fond of this cruel man, who treats you so shamefully ? " asked Madge earnestly.

Her own hopeless love made her sympathetic. She could pity this older woman who had sacrificed all for the man from whom she now had only neglect for her guerdon.

"Was I ever fond of him ? Yes," muttered Mrs. Mandeville.

"Don't I tell you that I was his slave? I have had my admirers by the dozen—I have had my victims, too, and have wasted three or four fortunes in my time. I was not called Madge Wildfire for nothing. But this was the only one man I ever cared for—the only one who was the same to me in riches or poverty—the only one for whom I made sacrifices. You would think I was lying, perhaps, if I were to tell you the chances I have had, and thrown away for his sake. You think, perhaps, that such as we don't have our chances. But we do, girl, and better chances than the women who are brought up in cotton-wool, and looked after by affectionate mothers and high-minded fathers. I might have married a man with half a million of money. I might have married a man with a handle to his name, and might have been called my lady, and your ladyship—I, Madge Wildfire. But I flung away my chances, because I loved Jack Mandeville—loved him and stuck to him till he got tired of me, and only valued me as a handsome decoy, to sit at the head of his dinner table, and look sweet at his rich young dupes when they dropped in for a night's play. This house has cost Colonel Mandeville very little, Madge; but he is tired of it, and of me. He let me give a bill of sale on the furniture to my milliner, and there is an execution in for nine hundred pounds odd, and if that's not paid out every stick will be sold, and I shall be turned into the street. I owe my landlord three quarters' rent, and he's furious about the bill of sale. There'll be no mercy from him, even if I could live in a house without furniture. That's how the land lies. That was what drove me to poison myself. I saw ruin staring me in the face, and I saw that Mandeville did not care what became of me."

"Why stay here then? Why not come with me at once?"

"Because he may change his mind—he may bring me the money to-night. He has not been here since that business with the poison. But I wrote to him this morning at his club, a letter that might melt a stone. He may help me after all. He may be here to-night."

"Very well, mother. I will come again to-morrow morning," said Madge, kissing her mother's burning forehead, and then moving towards the door.

"You had better stay upon the premises if you want to save me from myself."

"Anything but that. No, mother, I *must* go. But I promise to be here early."

"But to-morrow I don't promise to see you," answered Mrs. Mandeville angrily. "You are a proud, cold-hearted, insolent slut. I never want to see your face again."

"I shall be here to-morrow morning," said Madge, unmoved by this burst of temper; and she was gone.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE WILDERNESS

This journey to a strange city was not so wild an act upon Madge's part as it might seem on the surface of things. She had thought long and seriously before launching her frail bark upon that tempestuous sea. She was a girl of strong character—a resolute, energetic nature—which could scarce go on existing without an object to live for. The mere sluggish, monotonous eating and drinking, and sleeping and waking, the empty mechanism of life, was not enough for her. She must have some one to love; she must have something to do.

Her fellow-servants at the Abbey had wondered at the impetus with which this novice in the art of house-cleaning had set about her work, the vehement industry with which she had cleaned brasses and polished looking-glasses, and swept and dusted. That strong frame needed movement; that tumultuous heart could only be calmed by constant occupation.

She had loved Valentine Belfield with all her might. She had been tempted, many a time, to fling herself into his arms, to throw herself in the dust at his feet, to surrender to him as a beaten foe surrenders—slavishly, knowing not what her future was to be, what the cost of that self-abandonment. But she had battled with that weaker half of her nature—the woman's passionate heart; and the strong brain, which had something masculine in its power, had come to her rescue. She had sworn to herself with clenched hands and set teeth that she would not go that easy, fatal road by which so many girls have travelled; girls whose stories she knew, girls who had been shining lights in the parish school, model students in the Scripture classes, white-veiled saints at confirmation. She would not do as they had done, yield to the first tempter.

If her mother had gone wrong, there was so much the more reason that she should cleave to the right.

She fought that hard fight between love and honour, but the agony of the strife was bitter, and it aged and hardened her. She hardened still more when she saw her lover transferring his liking to another woman. She was keen to note the progress of that treacherous love. Helen had found her the handiest and cleverest of the housemaids, and had preferred her services to those of any one else. And while she assisted at Beauty's toilet, Madge had ample opportunity to note the phases of Beauty's mind, and to discover the kind of intellect

that worked behind that classic forehead, and the quality of the heart which beat under that delicately moulded bust.

She found Colonel Deverill's daughter shallow and fickle and false. She discovered her treason—had seen her with Valentine just often enough to be sure of their treachery against Adrian. And by this time she had discovered Adrian's infinite superiority to his brother in all the higher attributes of manhood. She knew this, yet she had not wavered. Her nature was too intense for the possibility of fickleness or inconstancy. She loved with purpose and sincerity, as well as with passion. There was no wavering in her affection; yet she admired Adrian with a power of appreciation which was far in advance of her education. Passing to and fro in the corridor near the library, she had stopped from time to time to listen to the organ or the piano, under those sympathetic fingers. Music was a passion with her; and till this time she had heard scarcely any music except the church organ, indifferently played by a feeble old organist. This music of Adrian's was a revelation in its infinite variety, its lightness, its solemnity, its unspeakable depths of feeling.

Once in the winter twilight she heard him playing Gounod's "Faust," gliding from number to number, improvising in the darkness of the old sombre room, where there was no light but the glow of the fire. The lamp had not yet been lighted in the corridor; the other servants were all at their tea. Madge crouched in the embrasure of the door, and drank in those sounds to her heart's content.

When he played the "Dies Irae," she fell on her knees, and had to wrestle with herself lest she should burst into sobs.

In another of those solitary twilight hours, while Helen and Valentine were out with the hounds, he played "Don Giovanni," and again Madge crouched in his doorway and drank in the sweet sounds. The lighter music moved her differently, yet in this there were airs that thrilled her. There was an awfulness sometimes in the midst of the lightness. When the spring came and the afternoons were light she could no longer lurk in the corridor; but her attic was in a gable above the library, and when Sir Adrian's windows were open she could hear every note in the still April air.

The sound of that music seemed a kind of link between them, for apart as they were in all other things, and over and above her jealousy on her own account, she was angry and jealous for Adrian's sake. She could have wept over him as the victim of a woman's feebleness, a man's treachery.

And now she told herself that she had nothing to love or care for upon this earth. He who had wooed her with such passionate persistence a few months ago had transferred his love to another.

She stood alone in the world; and in her loneliness her heart yearned for that erring mother, of whose face she had no memory.

She tried to penetrate the mists of vanished years, to grope back to that infantine existence before her grandfather had found her squatting beside his hearth in the autumn twilight. He had told her that she was old enough to talk a little, and to toddle about at his heels. Surely she ought to be able to remember.

Yes, she had a kind of memory, so faint and dim, that she could scarcely distinguish realities from dreams in that remote past.

Yes, she remembered movement, constant movement, rolling wheels, summer boughs, summer dust, clouds of dust, white dust that choked her as she lay asleep in that rolling home, amidst odours of hay and straw. She remembered rain, endless days of rain and greyness, dull, dreary days, when she squatted on the loose straw at the bottom of a gipsy's van, staring out at a dull, dim world.

There was a dog, which she was fond of. The sensation of a dog's warm, friendly tongue licking her face always recalled those long, slow hours of dull grey rain or sunlit dust; that strange vague time in which the days rolled into the nights, without difference or distinction, and in which faces mixed themselves somehow, no one face being more vivid than another. There was no memory of a mother's face, bending over her in day-time and night-time, nearer and more familiar than all the rest.

Despite this void in her memory, she had yearned after the mere idea of motherly love. She had seen other girls with their mothers, scolded and petted, kissed and slapped by turns: and in spite of the slaps and hard words, she had seen that a mother's love was a good thing—strong and tender, and inexhaustible. And then, as she progressed from the knowledge of good to the knowledge of evil, she brooded over the mystery of that life which she had been told was full of shame, and began to meditate how she was to help and save her erring mother. She had heard her grandfather prophesy evil for his ungrateful daughter; the evil days that were to come with faded beauty and broken health, the natural end of a wicked life.

At the Abbey, Madge's knowledge of the world grew daily. Her fellow-servants were older than herself, quick witted, experienced in that seamy side of life which is seen from the butler's pantry and the servants' hall. The old Abbey servants were rural and narrow enough; but there were those who had served in many households before they came to the Abbey, and these knew the world in many phases.

One to whom Madge took most kindly was a woman of thirty, who had taken to domestic service only five years before, after

losing a widowed mother, with whom and for whom she had toiled in a factory from fifteen to five-and-twenty.

It was a cartridge factory in the Gray's Inn Road at which Jane White and her mother had worked, the mother off and on as her health permitted, the daughter from year's end to year's end, without respite. They had occupied a couple of attics in a side street not far from the factory; they had their own poor sticks of furniture, and had lived in their two little rooms under the tiles, happy enough, till death came to part them; and then Jane White sickened of her loneliness and her independence, and she, who had once sworn that she would never eat the bread of servitude, never call any one master or mistress, changed her mind all at once and went into service for company's sake.

She was an energetic, hard-working girl, and made a good servant, so good that, after emigrating to Devonshire with a middle-class family, whose service she left after a year or so in a huff, the rumour of her good qualities reached Mrs. Marrable through the butcher's foreman, and she was engaged as second housemaid at the Abbey.

Here Madge took to her, as the kindliest of all her fellow-servants, and from her Madge learned all she knew of London, and the possibility of an industrious girl maintaining herself by the labour of her hands.

Was cartridge making hard to learn, Madge asked.

No, it was learned by easy stages. There were hands taken on that knew nothing about it before they went there. Jane White gave Madge a little pencil note addressed to a man who was an authority in the factory, who engaged the hands and dismissed them at his pleasure.

"We used to walk out together on Sunday evenings," said Jane, "and I think he'd do a good turn to any friend of mine. He might want to walk out with you, perhaps, if you took his fancy, but it would be for you to settle that. He's a well-conducted young man."

Madge smiled a smile of exceeding bitterness, but was mute.

And now in the mild spring night she tramped from Mayfair to Gray's Inn Road, inquiring her way very often, and plodding resolutely onward with her face to the east, caring nothing for the strangeness of those everlasting streets, or the lateness of the hour. She had such a dogged air, seemed so absorbed in the business she was bent upon, that no one addressed her, or tried to hinder her progress. But fast as she walked it was nearly eleven o'clock when she arrived in the dingy, little street at the back of Gray's Inn Road, so far behind the road as to be in the rear of the prison, which she passed shudderingly, for the idea of captive criminals was new and thrilling to her.

Jane had told her that the woman with whom she had lodged

was a sempstress, and always at her sewing machine till after midnight; so, though the clocks were striking eleven as she passed the prison, Madge had no fear of finding the door shut in her face. The only question was as to whether the landlady would have an unoccupied room to give her. She found the number. The street was squalid, but the house looked tidier than its neighbours, and the door step was clean. There was a paraffin lamp burning brighty in the little parlour, and the lean elderly female who answered the door had an air of decent poverty. She looked at Madge suspiciously, but on hearing Jane White's name, she softened, and at once became friendly, and acknowledged that she had room for a lodger.

"It's the bed-room where Jane and her mother used to sleep," she said. "I furnished it after they left. It's a clean, airy room, with a nice look-out towards King's Cross. It'll be half-a-crown a week, and you'll have to pay for washing the linen, and beyond boiling your kettle for you in summer time, you mustn't expect any attendance from me. I'm too busy to wait upon lodgers, and I only charge the bare rent of the room."

"That will suit me very well," answered Madge. "It will be for my mother and me."

"Oh," said the woman, "you've got a mother, have you? What does she do for a living?"

Madge reddened at the question.

"Nothing, just at present," she said; "she's out of health."

"But I suppose you are working at something," asked the woman, waxing suspicious. "You're not living on your fortune," with a sneer.

Madge explained her views about the cartridge factory, and, reassured by this, Mrs. Midgery took her up the steep, uncarpeted stairs to the attic, with its one dormer window looking over a forest of chimney-pots towards the glories of King's Cross and its triple stations. At this hour there was nothing to be seen from the window but the distant whiteness of the electric light shining between the smoke and the clouds.

It was a small, shabby room, with an ancient iron bedstead, two rush-bottomed chairs, a rickety chest of drawers, and a still more rickety table. Everything in the room was one-sided and uneven, beginning with the floor, which was obviously uphill from the door towards the window. However, the room looked clean, and had a wholesome odour of yellow soap, as of boards that had been lately scrubbed.

"It's an old house," said Mrs. Midgery, with a deprecating air, "and an old house never pays anybody for their work; but there's no one can say I don't slave over it."

Madge took out her shabby little purse, a cast-off purse of Mrs. Marrable's, which that good soul had bestowed upon her

one morning with other unconsidered trifles that had been eliminated in the process of tidying a bureau. She gave Mrs. Midgery one of her last half-crowns, a week's rent in advance; and at this unasked-for payment she rose considerably in her landlady's estimation.

"I believe we shall get on very well together," she said. "I hope your mother is like you."

Madge was silent, looking round the little room in a reverie, comparing it with the luxurious litter, the velvet and lace curtains, and heaped-up cushions and easy chairs of the room in Mayfair. Could she hope that any woman with her mother's experience would endure life in such a garret as this?

But what if there were only the choice between the garret and suicide, and if the garret meant rescue from a bad man's alternate tyranny and neglect?

CHAPTER XVII.

BREAKING THE SPELL

For Valentine and Helen the summer and autumn of that eventful year drifted away unawares in one long honeymoon. They lived for each other, in a fond and foolish dream of love that was to be endless, contentment that was to know no change. They scarcely knew the days of the week, never the days of the month, in that blissful dream-time. They wrote no letters, they scarcely looked at a newspaper, they held no intercourse with the outside world. For a time love was enough—love and the luxurious idleness of the lake or the mountain side, the languid bliss of long moonlight evenings in the balcony or verandah, or on terraced walks, looking down upon a lake. The mountains and lakes were with them everywhere—an everlasting background to the mutability of honeymoon lovers.

They were happy in being at least six weeks in advance of the common herd. They had the great, white hotels almost to themselves. There was a reposeful silence in the empty corridors and broad staircases. They could lounge in gardens and summer-houses without fear of interruption from cockney or colonial, Yankee misses or German professors. In this happy summer time, Valentine gave full scope to the counterbalancing characteristic of his nature. He, who as a sportsman or an athlete was indefatigable—a creature of inexhaustible energies and

perpetual motion—now showed a fine capacity for laziness. No languid æsthete, fanning himself with a penny palm-leaf, and sniffing at a sunflower, ever sprawled and dawdled with more entire self-abandonment than this thrower of hammers and jumper of long jumps.

He would lie on his back in the sun, and let Helen read to him from breakfast to luncheon. He would lie in the stern of a boat all the afternoon. He would find it too great a burden to dress for dinner, and would take the meal *tête-à-tête* in an arbour, sprawling in a velvet shooting-jacket. He would allow his honeymoon bride to run upstairs for his handkerchief, his cigar-case, his favourite pipe or tobacco-pouch, twenty times a day.

"I like running your errands, love," the fair slave declared. "It does me good."

"I really think it does, sweet; for you always look prettier after one of those scampers. But you needn't rush all the way, pet. I am not in such a desperate hurry," added the Sultan graciously.

"But I am, Val. I want to be back with you. I count every moment wasted that parts us."

They stayed at Interlaken till the first week in July, and then went up to Murren for a week. It seemed further away from the herd, which was now beginning to pour into Switzerland. And then they wandered on to the Riffel, and anon into Italy, and dawdled away another six weeks beside the Italian lakes, always in the same placid idleness, reading only the very whipped cream of the book world, the lightest syllabubs and trifles in the shape of literature; knowing no more of the progress of the great busy, bustling world than they could learn from *Punch* or the Society papers, Helen reading the sporting articles aloud to her Sultan, and poring over the fashion articles afterwards for her own gratification.

She would clap her hands in a rapture over one of those enthralling essays.

"Isn't this too lovely, Val? 'Madge' says that there is to be *nothing* but olive green to be worn next winter; and I have three olive-green gowns in my trousseau."

"What a pity," said Valentine. "I like you in nothing so well as in white, like that gown you have on to-day, for example, soft white muslin rippling over with lace."

"But one can't walk about in white muslin in January, Val. I think you'll manage to like me a little in my olive-green tailor gown, with Astrachan collar and cuffs."

"I've no doubt you look adorable in it; but my taste inclines me to all that is most feminine in woman's dress. The stern simplicity of a tailor gown always suggests a strong-minded

young woman with stand-offish manners—the kind of person who talks politics and calls young men puppies."

"You need not be afraid of my talking politics," said Helen, proud of her ignorance.

"No, love; that pretty little head has no room in it for big questions."

The longest honeymoon must come to an end at last. Long as it was, Valentine knew no satiety in that solitude of two, that unbroken dualogue in which the subject was always love's young dream. Helen was pretty enough and sweet enough in her fondness and subjection to keep this self-willed and selfish nature in a paradise of content. Still, the dream-life among lakes and mountains must come to an end somehow. Valentine gave up otter-hunting without a sigh; he let the twelfth slip by, though he had an invitation for Scotland and another for Yorkshire—moors that were to cost his friends three or four hundred pounds for the season, and which were well worth shooting over. He gave up the beginning of the partridge season, and disappointed a particular chum whose estate in Norfolk was famous for its partridges. But he told Helen one day that he must be back at the Abbey in time for the pheasants.

"We can be in London for the last week in September," he said, "and we can inspect the flat which my mother has furnished for us in the wilds of South Kensington. I should have preferred Mayfair or St. James's; but I am told our income would not stretch to Mayfair."

"Our income," sighed Helen. "How good of you to say 'ours,' when I did not bring you a sixpence."

"What did Helen bring to Paris? Not much, I fancy, dearest; and yet even the old fogies of Troy thought she was worth fighting for. You brought me beauty and youth and love. What more could the heart of man desire?"

He kissed the fair face bending over him, as he lay on a sofa by an open window, with the moths droning in and out from the dewy garden, and with the mists of night rising slowly between lawn and lake.

"Yes, dear, we had better go back about the twentieth, I take it."

"And this is the fourth! So soon! And then our honeymoon will be over," said Helen sorrowfully. "Shall we ever be as happy again as we have been among the mountains and lakes?"

"Why not? We shall be just as happy next summer, I hope—somewhere else. We would not come here again, of course."

"Oh, Val, does that mean you are tired of Maggiore—tired of our honeymoon?"

"No, love, but I think we have had quite enough of Switzerland, and the Italian lakes—at any rate for the next ten years."

"Oh, Val, there is a tone in your voice as if you had been bored."

He yawned before he answered.

"I have been intensely happy, child—but, well, I think we have been idle long enough, don't you?"

"No, no, no—not half long enough. I should like this delicious life to go on for ever."

"And you are not longing to see your sister, and the shops?"

"Not a bit."

"Well, I confess to a hankering after my tailor, and an inclination for my favourite club."

"Oh, Val, do you belong to a club?" she exclaimed ruefully.

"Not being a naked savage I certainly do belong to more than one club, my pet; or rather I have three or four clubs belonging to me by right of election."

"And your favourite club, which is that?"

"It is rather a—well—a rapid club. It is a temple whose name is rarely spoken in the broad light of day. It only begins to have any positive existence towards midnight, and its pulse beats strongest on the brink of dawn."

"Is it one of those dreadful clubs where they play cards?"

"Yes, it shares that privilege in common with a good many other clubs, from the Carlton downwards."

"But now you are married, Val, you will give up most of your clubs, I hope."

"My dearest child, that shows how little you know of the London world. London to a man in my position means clubland. It is nothing else. A man lives in London because his clubs are there; not because his house is there. The club in modern life is the Forum, the Agora, the rendezvous of all that is best and wisest in the town."

"But a club that only begins to exist at night——"

"Is the necessary finish to a man's day. I shall not go there so often as I used to go, of course, now I am married; but you will have your evening engagements, and while you are listening to classical music, which I abhor, or dancing, which I was always a duffer at, I can slip round to the Pentheus for an hour or so, and be back in time to hand you to your carriage."

"The Pentheus. Is that the name of your favourite club?"

"Yes; that is the name."

Helen had an unhappy feeling from the moment the date of their return was fixed. She had revelled with a childish joy in

her honeymoon. She had been proud of its length. "So long, and we are not the least little bit tired of each other, are we, Val?" she had said twenty times, in her enthusiasm, and had been assured with kisses that there was no shadow of weariness on her adoring husband's part.

"Leo declared we should be sick of each other before the end of June," she said, "and we shall have been away three months. But I can't help feeling somehow as if going back to England will be like the breaking of a spell."

Her prophecy seemed to her to realize itself rather painfully on the homeward journey. It was a long journey, and Valentine was in a hurry to be in London. They travelled by considerable stages, and the heat was intolerable, such heat and such dust as Helen had never experienced before. The stuffiness of the carriage, the slowness of the train, the frequent stoppages, the crowded buffets, the selfish crowd, were all trying to a man of difficult and imperious temper. Valentine's temper, after the first three hours of that ordeal, became diabolical. He ignored Helen; he thought of nothing but his own discomfort. He angrily rejected all her little attentions, her fannings and dabbings of eau-de-cologne, her offers of grapes and peaches, her careful adjustment of blind or window.

"I wish you'd stop that d——d worrying," he exclaimed. "The heat is bad enough without your abominable fidgeting to make it worse."

Yes, the spell was broken. The honeymoon was over. They stopped in Paris for a couple of days at the Hotel du Louvre, and here life was pleasant again, and Helen was happy with her Sultan, sitting about under the great glass roof, reading the newspapers and sipping cool drinks. But on the second evening of their stay, Valentine went off, directly after dinner, to hunt up a bachelor friend in the Faubourg St. Honoré, promising to be back early.

He kept his word in one sense, for it was early next morning when he returned. Helen had been lying awake in the spacious bed-room, with its three long windows facing the Rue de Rivoli. The night was very warm, and all the windows were open. She had heard every stroke of the bells of Notre Dame, and she knew that it was nearly three o'clock when her husband came in.

"Oh, Val," she exclaimed reproachfully. "You promised to be home early. It has been such a long dismal night."

"Why the deuce couldn't you go to sleep and make it shorter!" retorted Mr. Belfield, in accents that were somewhat thicker than his ordinary speech. "I couldn't get back any sooner. De Mauprat had some fellows to supper, and I wasn't master of my time."

CHAPTER XVIII.

NOT A DOMESTIC MAN

THE nest for the love-birds from honeymoon-land was as pretty a nest as one could find after the new fashion of many homes under one roof. It was a third-floor flat in a newly erected range of mansions near the Victoria Road, Kensington, a range which had been called Wilkie Mansions, because the great painter had once lived somewhere thereabouts, in the long-forgotten days when the villages of Kensington and Brompton were separated by rustic lanes and market gardens. The houses were red brick, flamboyant-Flemish in style, miscalled Queen Anne. Oriel windows jutted out at every available point, and wherever a niche and a flower-pot could be introduced, the niche and the pot were put there. Impossible balconies of artistic ironwork projected from every storey, sunflower minarets glittered along the roof, and no two windows were of the same shape.

The flat had been ostensibly chosen and ostensibly furnished by Lady Belfield; but she had in her graciousness invited Mrs. Baddeley to be her counsellor, and Mrs. Baddeley had been the prevailing spirit in all things. When it was found impossible to get a small house in a good neighbourhood at a reasonable rent, it was Mrs. Baddeley who suggested a flat, and dwelt upon the privilege of paying no taxes.

"But I think one is hardly a gainer by having one's taxes included in one's rent," said Lady Belfield, "and the rents of these flats seem to be extortionate."

"The rents are high, no doubt; but then it is so nice to pay rent and taxes with one cheque, and not to be obliged to puzzle one's poor uncommercial brain about highway rates or Queen's taxes," said Leo pleasantly. "I have taken a delicious little flat in Wilkie Mansions. It is on the third floor; but there is a lift, so distance is no consequence. There are four rooms, and a dear little squeezy room, lighted by a skylight opening on the stairs, which will just accommodate two servants. The decorations are lovely, pure Queen Anne; and the rent is only a hundred and fifty. Why should not Mr. Belfield and Helen take the corresponding flat on the other side of the stairs? It would be so nice for Helen and me to be living in the same house, always at hand to help each other in any way, and yet thoroughly independent of each other."

Lady Belfield received the suggestion favourably. No doubt

it would be good for the sisters to be near each other. Helen was very young to begin life alone; and Valentine was too restless a spirit to settle down into the stay-at-home domestic husband, who lectures the maidservants, finds out cobwebs in the corners of the cornice, and twaddles through existence at his wife's apron-string. The mother's experience of her son had warned her that he might prove a neglectful husband.

She took kindly to the idea of those rooms opposite Mrs. Baddeley's apartments. They were bright and airy, and the topmost boughs of the good old elms in Kensington Gardens could just be descried from the oriel window.

"A charming view," said Mrs. Baddeley, who was always in love with a new abode.

Her husband was to go back to the East in November, and was likely to be away two or three years. Colonel Deverill, having safely established his second daughter, had become a nomad. His year's tenancy of Morcomb would expire before the end of the year; and he had told his elder child frankly that he should only have Kilrush for a *pied-à-terre* henceforward.

"*There*, my love, you will always be welcome," he said kindly.

"Poor papa forgets that I loathe the place," Leo told her husband. "I must have my own *pied-à-terre*, and it must be in London; and then there will be a home ready for you, Frank, when you leave the army and look about you for something to do."

It was understood that Major Baddeley was to retire from active service in a few years, and that he was to eke out his income somehow. His ideas upon the subject were shadowy. He had floating visions of turning wine-merchant, guinea-pig, or going on the stage. He had a notion that a man of his appearance, and with the true cavalry-mess manner, ought to do well at a West End theatre.

He gave a long whistle at the idea of his wife setting up an establishment of her own.

"Won't it go into money, Leo?" he said.

"Not much, and it can't be helped if it does," she answered coolly. "I must live somewhere, and there will be no home for me with papa after he gives up Morcomb. I shall be very economical, and I mean to earn a hatful of money by literature. I am sure I could write better than lots of people whose books sell, if I put my shoulder to the wheel."

"I am sure you could, Leo. You're out and away the cleverest woman I know, and I think there's nothing you could not do," said Frank, with enthusiasm.

So the rooms were taken, and furnished in the Japanese style, Mrs. Baddeley having obtained an introduction to a

wholesale Oriental firm in the City, one of whose members had a son in Major Baddeley's regiment.

It was to this Oriental warehouse that Mrs. Baddeley conducted Lady Belfield when the matter of furniture was first discussed. The Japanese style was her passion, and Lady Belfield allowed herself to be influenced by the sight of gold-embroidered screens and bamboo blinds, enamelled vases, and curiously carved ebony cabinets; and almost before she knew what she was doing, she had allowed her son's new home to become a kind of temple, where josses nodded in every corner and beaded bamboo curtains rustled at every door, and where the floors were covered with a parti-coloured rush matting, which looked delightful in summer, but which might have a chilly effect in winter. Here, however, the remedy was easy, and Mrs. Baddeley selected half a dozen costly Indian rugs, which were to lie about the rooms in your true artistic style and trip visitors up unexpectedly.

To this Japanese bower Mr. Belfield and his wife came on a sultry September afternoon about tea-time, and were warmly welcomed by Mrs. Baddeley, whose dexterous hands had filled the vases with poppies, cornflowers, and nasturtiums, in clusters of vivid colour, and had made picturesque arrangements of bulrushes and palm leaves in the fireplaces and lobby. Everything was very small, very elegant, and harmonious.

The master of the dainty little house was the only object that looked out of place. He seemed ever so much too big for his surroundings.

"What a fine toyshop you have got for a drawing-room, Leo," he said, looking round him in scornful amusement. "I hope our sticks are a little more substantial."

"My dear Valentine, these *are* your sticks. This is your apartment, don't you know? Mine is almost exactly like it, over the way."

Valentine's brow darkened.

"Do you mean to tell me that my mother chose all this trumpery?" he asked rudely.

"Lady Belfield certainly chose the furniture, with a little assistance from me; but I beg to assure you that there is not a bit of trumpery in your rooms. Everything is substantial, solid—— Good heavens, Valentine, how clumsy you are!" exclaimed Mrs. Baddeley, interrupting herself hastily, as a lacquer table, gold and vermilion, twelve-legged, beautiful, was whisked over by the owner's coat tails.

"And you expect me to live in a room of this kind, like a stall at a charity bazaar," ejaculated Valentine. "I thought my mother had more sense. I thought she knew me better than to waste her money on such accursed rubbish."

"But, dearest Val, everything is positively lovely," pleaded Helen, looking as if she were just going to cry, "and it is all the height of fashion."

"Fashion!" cried her husband. "Does a man sit upon fashion, or eat his dinner off fashion, or keep himself warm with fashion? There is not a chair in this room I should like to sit in, and in cold weather it will be a place to shiver in rather than to live in. Egad, I shall have to sit in my Astrachan coat if I sit here at all."

"A drawing-room is usually considered the wife's province. Her taste is supposed to be paramount there," observed Mrs. Baddeley, with dignity.

"I suppose that's the reason so many men live at their clubs," said Valentine.

"Oh, Val, we can change all the furniture if you don't like it," exclaimed Helen piteously; "don't say that you'll desert me for those horrid clubs."

"Is the dining-room—Japanese—too?" Valentine asked Mrs. Baddeley, with ineffable disgust, completely ignoring Helen.

"You had better look at it and judge for yourself," replied Leo, with her stateliest air. "Good-bye, Helen. I thought I might have poured out your tea on your first afternoon, as you must be rather tired. But I'll come and see you another time, when your husband is in a better temper."

She sailed out of the room with her head in the air, and Mr. Belfield made not the faintest attempt to prevent her departure, nor did he take any more notice of her exit than if a fly had flown out of the window.

Helen had learnt her lesson of submission already.

"Let us look at the dining-room, Val," she said sweetly. "I'm sure that will be nice," and her husband followed her in dogged silence.

Drawing-room and dining-room were divided only by an archway and an Oriental curtain. Very picturesque, very inconvenient, draughty in winter, stuffy in summer, letting the smell of the dinner into the drawing-room at all seasons.

"How convenient for throwing the two rooms into one when we have an evening party," said Helen, waxing hopeful at the idea.

"And when you have thrown your two rooms into one, where are you to feed your people?" asked Valentine.

"Oh, one doesn't feed people of an evening. We could give tea and coffee and ices in the lobby."

The drawing-room was light and aërial; the dining-room was dark and ponderous. Here, too, all was Oriental, but it was the Orientalism of India; mysterious, uncanny, suggestive of Juggernaut and Bowanie. The sideboard was Bombay black-

wood, richly carved, and flourished all over with dragons and demons, surmounted with a sacred bull, in bronze, copied from the antique. The curtains were tawny, splashed with red, and might have been symbolical of fire and gore. The square centre carpet was rich, yet sombre, with a surrounding of slippery floor, stained dark as ebony. Three Titanic armchairs, covered in different tones of olive and tawny plush, nearly filled the room, and a small oval table, heavily carved, indicated that only the most select dinner parties would be given in that Oriental temple. The fireplace glowed and glittered with brass and blood-red tiles; the over-mantel was black-wood, carved and fretted, and the niches of the woodwork were relieved by brazen and copper vessels of classic form, bought in Naples for a few francs, and sold in Regent Street for a few pounds. Heavy Indian curtains darkened the latticed windows, and obscured the view of house-tops and intersecting railways, tall chimneys and signal posts.

"Not quite so bad as the drawing-room," said Valentine, flinging himself into the most luxurious of the three chairs, and taking out his cigar-case. "If we have only these two rooms, this will have to be my den, I suppose. Luckily you don't mind smoke."

"As if I should mind smoke, when you are a smoker," protested Helen, with her worshipping look. "I am so glad you like our dining-room."

"I didn't say I liked it; only it's a little better than your jimcrack drawing-room. The whole establishment is too much like a doll's house for my taste. I would rather have had a first floor in Russell Square. It would have been nearer the clubs than this, and we should have had room to breathe in."

"Dearest Valentine, you know nobody lives in Russell Square. I should have been alone in a desert."

The bed-room and dressing-rooms were unobjectionable. Here Lady Belfield's good sense had prevailed over Mrs. Baddeley's Oriental yearnings. All was neat, simple, and convenient. Helen's dressing-room, intended by the builder for a double bed-room, was large enough to do duty for a boudoir. Valentine's was of respectable dimensions, and afforded plenty of accommodation for bath and wardrobe.

"Then we have only one bed-room," said Mr. Belfield, when he had completed his survey. "I'm very glad of that."

"Why, dear?"

"Because we can't have any girl-friend of yours to stay with us."

"You would rather we should be quite alone," said Helen, nestling up to him with one of her honeymoon gushes of tenderness.

"Of course I would. Girls are always a bore—want to be taken out every night—expect a man to dress for dinner—can't stand smoke—regular nuisance!"

"You wouldn't be troubled by any friends of mine, Val, even if we had a spare room. We led such a roving life with father that I never had time to get attached to any girl I met. Leo and I were always good friends and very fond of each other. Of course after she married I felt a little lonely—but I never took to any one else. I always felt at a disadvantage with other girls. I was not so well off, or so well educated, as they were—and they seemed to look down upon me. And now what can I want with girls, when I have you? My world begins and ends in my husband," she concluded, perching herself on the arm of the big chair in which he was reposing.

"I hope you have a servant who can cook decently," said Valentine.

"Your dear mother has attended to that. We have two Devonshire girls, sisters, the daughters of a tenant farmer in reduced circumstances, who have been obliged to go out into service. Very superior to the common run of servants."

"I hope that doesn't mean that they are arrant duffers," grumbled Valentine, with his cigar between his lips. "It sounds like it."

"You may be sure Lady Belfield would not have engaged them unless they were capable and clever."

"Perhaps you'll ring and let me see if one of these treasures is capable of giving me a brandy-and-soda."

"With the utmost pleasure, dearest," and Helen flew first to the electric bell, and then to a silver Tantalus on the sideboard, which had been one of her wedding presents.

A fresh-coloured girl answered the summons. She was prettily dressed in a dark-red gown, a large muslin apron, and a mobcap, with a coquettish red bow at the top. The dress had an artistic air, and had been specially designed by Mrs. Baddeley. The girl, who answered to the name of Phœbe, seemed perfectly at home in her duties.

Valentine drank his brandy-and-soda, and looked at his watch.

"You don't dine till eight, of course," he said; "I think there'll be time for me to go to the club before dinner."

"On our first day, Val! And it's nearly seven now."

"Yes, it is rather late. I'd better go after dinner."

"What, in the evening! And leave me alone—as you did in Paris," exclaimed Helen, almost crying.

"Paris was an exceptional affair—an unexpected party which I was let in for. To-night I shall only go to look about me, and

see who's in town. Besides, you need not be alone here. You have your sister."

Helen's only answer was a heart-broken sigh. Yes, the spell was broken. The honeymoon was over.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RETURN OF PROSERPINE

Those veteran elms in Kensington Gardens, whose wind-blown crests were just visible from Helen's windows, were older by more than a year and a half since that first inspection of the flat in Wilkie Mansions, and Helen had grown accustomed to married life as understood by Valentine Belfield. She had learnt to recognize the fact that although he was fond of her, and proud of her beauty, he had no idea of making any alteration in his own manner of living, or sacrificing any one of his pleasures or amusements on account of his wife. If his amusements were such as she could share, he was willing that she should share them. He took her to race meetings, and cricket grounds, and regattas, when she was well enough to go with him; but when her delicate health kept her at home, that fact made no difference in his arrangements. There came a time when she was nervous and low-spirited, unable to go out of an evening, yet feeling the burden of her loneliness almost intolerable; but her husband frankly told her that she could not expect him to sacrifice his evening amusements—his whist club or his theatres—because she was moping at home.

"What the deuce would be the good if I were to sit upon the other side of the fire and mope with you?" he said. "Besides, you have your sister."

"You talk as if Leo were laid on like the water and the gas," Helen said irritably; "she has her evening engagements as well as you."

"Uncommonly selfish of her to be gadding about just when you want her most," said Valentine. "It is a woman's place to look after her sister at such a time."

Helen sighed and was silent. Those sighs and silences irritated Valentine. It was a relief to him to run downstairs and get out into the mild mugginess of a London autumn, to hail a cab, and be off to his daily haunts at the West End; it was a still greater relief to sally forth with gun-case or hunting

gear, on his way to a railway which was to take him to some pleasant country-house or snug bachelor den, where there were sport and good fellowship, pretty women or congenial men.

The fond hopes which had soothed Helen in her solitary evenings were doomed to bitterest disappointment. Her baby-son died before he was a week old; and the shock of the infant's death, which came upon her suddenly, brought on a nervous fever.

For more than six weeks Helen was seriously ill; and during some parts of that time her life was in danger. Trained nurses took possession of that small domicile in Wilkie Mansions. Lady Belfield came up to London to watch over her daughter-in-law; and Mrs. Baddeley showed a great deal of solicitude, though she did not forego her evening engagements or desert Sandown Park. For the first two or three weeks Valentine was anxious and attentive; but after the illness had lasted a month his attentions relaxed, and he began to regard his wife's condition as chronic. There was a dreary monotony about the sick-room which bored him beyond endurance. The nurses in their uniform; the recurrent visits of the doctor; the reports of the invalid's condition—for ever fluctuating between good and evil—the whole business hung upon Mr. Belfield's spirits like a nightmare. He was gladder than ever to get away from his home, keener than ever to accept invitations from his bachelor friends.

All this had happened six months ago. Helen had escaped from doctors and nurses soon after Christmas, but she seemed only the shadow of her former self when she first came out of the sick-room, and went for an hour's drive with Mrs. Baddeley, in the pretty little victoria which that lady had found necessary to her existence. It was only a jobbed victoria, as she told her friends piteously; but it was a very smart little carriage, with a smart coachman. Mrs. Baddeley's page sat beside him on the box, and the turn-out was altogether respectable.

The necessity for a victoria, exchangeable in the evening for a brougham, was indisputable, seeing that within the last twelve months Leonora Baddeley had become in somewise a public character. She had taken to literature. She wrote for the Society papers. Stories, essays, hunting articles, racing articles, fashion articles--nothing came amiss to her facile and somewhat reckless pen. She wrote with the air of a woman who lived among duchesses, and who dined every night with Cabinet Ministers. Upon politics, morals, art, sport, finance, she wrote with equal authority, and a self-assertive audacity that convinced the average reader.

Nor was literature the grass widow's only occupation. She had burst upon the fashionable world as an amateur actress of distinction and capacity. She gave recitations at charity concerts,

she acted in open-air plays. She reminded elderly gentlemen indifferently of Mrs. Honey, Madame Vestris, and Mrs. Nesbitt. It was not to be supposed that she earned any money by these charity performances, and her gowns must have cost her a good deal; but as she was reported to be making a handsome income by literature, this did not matter; and nobody, except Helen, wondered at the elegant way in which Mrs. Baddeley contrived to live, or at the open-handed and thoroughly Irish hospitality of those pretty rooms on the right hand of the third-floor landing.

"I can't think how it is that money goes so much further with you than it does with me," Helen said, with a faint sigh, as she looked round her sister's luxurious drawing-room, with its profusion of tulips and narcissi in the window sills and the fireplace, and its vases of tuberoses and lilies of the valley.

"My dear, you forget that I am a bread-winner, while you and Valentine are like the lilies of the field, neither toiling nor spinning."

"I wish *I* could write for the papers, Leo."

"Everybody can't write for the papers, child," Mrs. Baddeley answered, rather sharply; "there is something in the way of talent wanted, or at least knack. Besides, the papers are not big enough to hold everybody's contributions. I happen to please them; and I have got into a groove that suits me exactly."

Helen sighed again. Valentine's way of life was expensive; and there were a good many accounts that ought to have been paid at Christmas, and which were still unpaid in April. Helen's walking gowns were shabby, and her evening gowns bore the stamp of last season; yet she dared not go to her milliner's lest she should be reminded of an account of some standing. First-class fares, tips to gamekeepers, and club subscriptions—to say nothing of that far deadlier item, losses at cards—had absorbed the cash that should have kept the little household in Wilkie Mansions free from debt.

And now Helen came out of that little world of the sick-room into the bright big world outside. She came out of darkness and weariness and constraint, like Proserpine returning from her six months' sojourn in the under-world. She was pale and thin and shadowy looking after her long illness; but the lovely Irish eyes were as brilliant as ever, and the mobile lips had all their old charm and sweetness. Never had she looked fairer to the eyes of that connoisseur in beauty, Lord St. Austell, than she looked this April afternoon, when Mrs. Baddeley's carriage drew up against the railings by the Row, in order to give that lady time to talk to her friends. The pensive light in those large violet eyes, the delicate transparency of the wild-rose com-

plexion, had a poetical charm which touched the sybarite's fancy; and St. Austell looked from the elder sister to the younger, wondering how he could ever have thought Leonora Baddeley beautiful.

He had heard of Helen's serious illness and of Valentine's neglect, and this alone would have given her an interest in his eyes. Neglected wives had been his specialty from the year he left Cambridge.

He told her how rejoiced he was to see her out again after her long imprisonment.

"It is like the awakening of the year," he said. "I really think this is the first perfect spring day. You and Chaucer's old English April visit us together. I hope we are going to see you everywhere now."

"She is hardly strong enough yet to go *everywhere*," answered Mrs. Baddeley, "but I mean to take her about with me more than I have done hitherto. I shall not let her play Joan to a husband who never plays Darby. My brother-in-law is a delightful young man; but he is just one of those delightful young men who should always remain bachelors. He has no vocation for domestic life."

"You have no right to say such a thing, Leo," said Helen, flushing indignantly. "You know how happy Val and I are together."

"When you are together, no doubt, dear. The rarity of the occurrence must give it a factitious interest."

"Oh, please keep your smart sentences for the *Macrocosm* or the *Bon Ton*, Leo, and let me manage my husband my own way."

Those bright spring days, which were full of gladness and animation for a good many people at the West End of London, brought only dejection and apathy for Helen Belfield. She looked out of the window and saw the carriages driving by to the Park, or a hansom cab bowling gaily along the street with that rakish, devil-may-care air which seems inseparable from a hansom. She listened to the hawker's dreary cry, borne from some invisible shabby-genteel street round the corner. She lay on her sofa by the open window yawning over a new novel, until she threw the book aside in sheer weariness of fictitious woes which touched no chord in her heart, and sat brooding over her own troubles, which seemed so very real.

Valentine was at Sandown or Epsom, or at Newmarket, and not expected home for a day or two. Last night she had waited dinner till nine o'clock—to-night it might be ten. He was not unkind to her. He professed to be as devoted to her as in the days of their honeymoon; and yet his indifference wounded her to the quick. He told her that a man must live his life—that

marriage would be an insufferable institution if it obliged a husband to abandon his favourite club and to be home at eight o'clock every evening.

"If you don't like waiting dinner, I had better dine at my club," he said. "I would rather do that than have to dine opposite a dismal face."

"No, indeed, Val, I don't mind waiting. I have never complained of having to wait, so long as you do come home. But sometimes you have disappointed me altogether; you have gone to a theatre or to one of your late clubs, and have left me to wonder and worry all the evening—such a long melancholy evening without you."

"You had no need to wonder and worry; you must know that a man who has a lot of friends is not always master of his actions."

"But a woman's mind is not always to be governed by needs. I could not help wondering. Sometimes I have wondered if I had married your brother Adrian whether I should have had quite so many solitary evenings."

"It's a great pity you did not marry Adrian, if you are beginning to repent your preference for me," said Valentine, with a darkening countenance.

"Dearest Val, how can you say such things? You know I have never repented. I never could repent my choice. My heart went out to you from the first, and I knew all at once that I had never really loved Adrian. He had been to me as a kind and dear friend, never as a lover. But I can't help sometimes wishing that you were like him in just one respect—that you were as fond of home as he is."

"In other words, you loved me because I was a man; and now you have got me you would like me to be a milksop. No, Helen; I am as unlike Adrian in my tastes and pursuits as I am like him in my person. I don't care for music, or books, or fireside musings. I am a man of action—cannot live without movement and variety. If you are wise you'll follow my example, and, instead of moping at home, go into society with your sister. I could often look you up of an evening if I knew where you were going."

"You promised that last year, Val, and you never came to any of my parties. I have sat for a whole evening watching the door, and refusing every dance, for fear I should miss you when you came—and you never appeared."

"It wasn't my fault, I assure you. There was always something to prevent my turning up."

"I think it was my disappointment about you that made me detest parties. I made a vow to myself that I would never go out again without you."

"Ah, that was last year, when you were out of health. Now you are blooming again, and it will do you good to see a little of life. If I were a jealous husband, I should be very glad for you to shut yourself up in these rooms; but I'm not jealous, and I know I can trust you."

"Indeed, dearest, you can," she said fondly, with her hands clasped upon his shoulder; "you know that for me you are the only man on earth."

"Well, I believe as much, Helen. You are one of those foolish lovable young women who are not ashamed to admire their own husbands. But really and truly, my pet, it grieves me to see you mope in the pleasantest time of the year. Leo says you would be included in all her evening invitations if her friends only knew you were willing. You have but to show yourself to be admired and sought after."

"There is one objection, Val," murmured Helen, blushing as she spoke.

"What is that?"

"I have not had a new gown since last summer, and people dress so much now-a-days, I should feel myself an old-fashioned dowdy."

"In last year's gown—although it cost five-and-thirty guineas, and was declared by you and Leo to be perfection—quite the gown of the season," cried Valentine mockingly; and then he took out a bloated pocket-book, and from a confusion of tissue-paper, Holt's lists, and bank-notes intermingled, he selected a note which he handed to his wife. "There, Helen. I was rather luckier than usual at Chester, the other day. There's a fifty to sweeten Madame Bouillon. You might order two gowns, I should think, on the strength of it."

"I will," cried Helen gaily, overcome by her husband's generosity. "How good you are, Val!"

"I like to see my little wife happy," he said blandly, not deeming it necessary to inform her that he had over a thousand pounds in that bloated pocket-book.

He never worried her about his losses, so why should he tell her of his winnings? He left her with a kiss, and was off to his afternoon lounge at Tattersall's. He left her happier than she had been since her convalescence.

"Dear fellow," she said to herself, "I know he loves me, although he may sometimes seem neglectful."

It was a lovely afternoon at the beginning of May. The sky was bluer than London skies generally are, the balmy west wind blowing the smoke eastward to darken the dwelling-places of the poor. Aristocratic London was dressed in smiles; suburban Kensington had a verdant and almost rustic air in the bright glad weather; and Helen's drawing-room was odorous with hothouse flowers.

Lord St. Austell had been sending her flowers two or three times a week since their chance meeting by the railing of the Row. He sent flowers and plovers' eggs and premature strawberries, as to an invalid. Mrs. Baddeley heard of these attentions, and lifted her finely pencilled eyebrows with a somewhat scornful air.

"He is more foolishly generous than any one I know," she said. "He is always sending hothouse fruit and flowers to sick chorus girls."

"I hope he does not rank you and me with chorus girls," protested Helen. "I suppose it is he who supplies you with all those lovely gardenias and lilies of the valley?"

"He and other people, my dear. I have more than one string to my bow."

Helen ran across to her sister's rooms soon after Valentine left her, and exhibited her fifty-pound note.

"If you like to take me out with you this afternoon, Leo, I can order a new gown; and then I can go with you to some of your parties."

"Certainly, dear, but one gown won't go very far."

"Oh, I can have some of the old ones touched up—if I have just one new one in the very latest style, with the season's cachet. Even one gown is an effort when one has a limited income. I can never understand how you manage to have so many, and from Mrs. Ponsonby, who is ever so much dearer than Madame Bouillon."

"Oh, Mrs. Ponsonby does not charge me as she does other people. I know how to manage her," Leonora answered carelessly.

The new gown was a triumph of art. Helen's was a style of beauty which needs no embellishment from colour. She always looked loveliest in white, and this last achievement was simplicity itself. A white satin gown, plainly cut, with a long train, and with no other trimming than a cascade of ostrich feathers, soft and pure as snowflakes. A cluster of these snow-white plumes adorned the bodice, and accentuated the whiteness of the wearer's bust and shoulders.

Mrs. Belfield had been admired last season, but she had not been talked about. This year it suddenly dawned upon that particular section of Society—neither the best nor the worst—in which Mrs. Baddeley moved, that Mrs. Belfield was the new beauty. Perhaps she would hardly have been so promptly elevated to this social pinnacle if it had not been at the same period discovered that St. Austell was over head and ears in love with her. Nobody had a word to say against the lady as yet; but it was obvious that wherever Mrs. Belfield appeared Lord St. Austell was to be seen hovering near her, obvious to every one

except to the lady herself, who saw nothing extraordinary in the fact of his lordship's presence.

She accepted his attentions at first with supreme indifference. He was her sister's admirer. He had been devoted to her sister at Morcomb two years ago, and she had no idea of any change in his sentiments. Leo's flirtations and Leo's admirers were taken for granted by Leo's sister. There was no harm in any such deviations from the beaten track. It was only Leo's way. Perhaps St. Austell was tired of worshipping a divinity who had so many other votaries; Mr. Beeching, for instance, among the most devoted. He certainly began to neglect the elder sister, and to concentrate his attentions upon the younger. He would spend five or ten minutes with Mrs. Baddeley, and then come across to Mrs. Belfield's drawing-room with a book or a piece of music, or tickets for opera or theatre—tickets which had been sent him by importunate managers, according to his own account.

"I was told last night that people had to wait six weeks to get stalls," Helen said incredulously, on one occasion, when St. Austell brought her three places for a fashionable theatre, "and yet the manager gives you tickets."

"Strange, isn't it? The fellows will send me tickets. They like to see me in the stalls. By-the-by, that is just the objection to those tickets. You will have me as an incubus. It would be bad form to accept the places and not show myself. If you and Mrs. Baddeley go, will you much mind taking me? or perhaps Mr. Belfield might go with you and would let me make a third."

"He would be delighted, but I'm afraid there's no chance of his going. He has so many evening engagements."

"Of course. I know his set. Men who always spend their evenings together. And will you and Mrs. Baddeley really not mind having me?"

"How could we be so ungrateful?"

"Oh, but I won't come if I am to be asked out of gratitude. That would make me actually an incubus. May I come, Mrs. Belfield? Just tell me my society won't spoil your evening.

"How can it, when we meet almost every evening," Helen answered naïvely. "If I didn't wish to see you I should never go anywhere, for somehow or other we are always meeting."

"Society is like the last figure of the Lancers," said St. Austell. "You must needs meet the same people over and over again. Meeting and passing on, always passing on; and the last chord separates one even from one's partner."

When was the time that Helen began to watch the door for the appearance of Lord St. Austell, as she had once watched for the coming of her husband, only that in this latter case there was no disappointment? When was it that the assembly first

began to brighten at his coming; when was it that his voice first began to move her like music? When was it that the day only began in that lazy afternoon hour when etiquette allowed his lordship's visits to the Japanese drawing-room, which daily looked more and more like a tropical bower, beautified by the flowers which he sent every morning, musical with the rare and costly birds which he had chosen for its adornment?

Helen could never remember how and when her sin began: how and when it was that she passed from the liberty of perfect innocence to the constraint of conscious guilt; but she awakened one day to the discovery that the husband she had once adored had become indifferent and was growing odious to her, and that the man who pursued her with unspoken love was the sole master of her heart and of her fate.

CHAPTER XX.

DRIFTING

Sir Adrian Belfield had been a traveller over the face of the earth for nearly two years before he turned his face homewards. He had seen most of the fairest spots in the Old World. He had spent half a year in Greece, and had seen Algiers and Tangiers, Egypt and the Holy Land. He had devoted the best part of a year to a leisurely saunter through Spain and Italy, taking his own time, and living the life of the country, roughing it a little now and then, so far as his health would allow, and seeing much more of people and of places than it is given to the average traveller to see. He had gone abroad to cure himself of a wound which he had at first thought incurable; and he did not turn his face homeward till he felt that he was heart-whole once more, and could meet his brother's wife without one pang of regret, one thrill of passionate feeling.

Yes, he was cured. A love which has its origin in the fancy or the senses is not difficult to eradicate. A love that has no more solid foundation than a beautiful face does not take a very strong hold of an intellectual character. Adrian was too clever a man not to discover, when the glamour of that first love had faded a little, that the woman he had adored was too shallow and light-minded to be worthy of broken hearts. She who could so easily transfer her allegiance from one brother to the other, who could break faith at the first temptation, was not a

woman for whom to die. And even that potent charm of beauty began to lose its power over his memory after a year's absence. Greece showed him women as beautiful; Italy showed him a more picturesque loveliness in the faces of peasant girls by the wayside; while in Society he met women who, with a little less than Helen's beauty, possessed the charm of intellectual power and brilliant accomplishments.

He learnt his lesson in those years of exile, and thanked God that he was able to learn it.

"I have been away from you an unconscionable time, dear mother," he wrote, knowing how keenly Lady Belfield had felt his absence; "but the purpose of my banishment is fulfilled. I am going home to you cured. No hidden feelings of mine will ever make a difficulty between Valentine and me, or put Valentine's wife to the blush. I can be to her henceforward as a brother."

This letter relieved Constance Belfield's mind of the fear of bad blood between those two sons who were her all upon this earth. She loved them both too well to have been happy while there was any shadow of ill-feeling between them. However she might lean to Valentine, she knew that Adrian was in all things the finer character and the better son; and the sorrow that had fallen upon him through his brother's rivalry had been a source of deepest pain to her.

It was not till he had gone from the Abbey that she knew how dear that elder son had been to her, or how essential to the happiness of her life. His wayward brother had occupied more of her thoughts, and had been a constant source of anxiety; but Adrian had been the companion of her days, had sympathized with her in all her pursuits, entered into all her plans for the good of others, joined in every elevating thought. He had been her second self; and she only knew it when he was gone.

The letter announcing his return made her feel ten years younger. It was so delightful to her that he should write in good spirits.

"I should like to see what the world is doing before I bury myself at the dear old Abbey," he wrote; "so I have engaged rooms at the Alexandra for the second and third week in June, with the notion that you would not mind joining me there. We can do the round of operas and theatres, and see all the picture galleries in a fortnight, leaving a margin for your dressmaker and my tailor."

Lady Belfield had not been in London since she went up to see her invalid daughter-in-law. Valentine and his wife had visited her at the Abbey twice since their marriage, and Valentine had been there for the hunting and shooting without his wife; running down to hunt or shoot for a few days, and going

back to London at the first unfavourable change in the weather. He treated the house as if it were his own, telegraphing to announce his arrival, leaving at half an hour's notice, and standing upon no kind of ceremony. Lady Belfield had been pleased that it should be so. She was glad that her son should use her house as his second home.

She came to London a day before Adrian was expected, so that she might be at the hotel to receive him, or meet him at the terminus. She had brought books and scent-bottles, paper-cutters, and work-baskets enough to give a home-like aspect even to an hotel sitting-room. She had brought a great basket of flowers from the Abbey gardens and hothouses, and she and her maid were at work nearly all the morning after her arrival filling vases and building up a bank of bloom in the fireplace.

Adrian was not expected till six in the evening, when his train was to arrive at Charing Cross.

Lady Belfield ordered a carriage and drove to Wilkie Mansions after luncheon. Mrs. Belfield was not at home.

"I think you will find my mistress over the way, my lady," said the maid, when she saw Lady Belfield's look of disappointment. "Or I can fetch her if you like."

"She is at Mrs. Baddeley's, you mean?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Thanks. I'll go there at once."

A silvery ripple of laughter greeted Constance Belfield's ear as the door was opened by the very smallest individual of the page genus—the smallest and the smartest. His livery was in perfect style, his innocent flaxen hair was brushed as carefully as if he had been a subaltern in a crack regiment.

The lobby into which this infant admitted Lady Belfield was picturesque in its arrangement of Oriental drapery and tropical palms; but it was very small, and only divided from the drawing-room by a curtain, through which the visitor heard masculine voices and laughter before the page could announce her.

On the curtain being lifted she saw the sisters lounging gracefully in low bamboo chairs, dressed almost alike in limp white muslin morning gowns, diaphanous, ethereal. Helen's heavy plaits of auburn hair had fallen down, and were hanging on her shoulders. Her dress had altogether an air of deshabille which Lady Belfield did not approve in a lady who was receiving masculine visitors.

The visitors were two, Lord St. Austell and Mr. Beeching.

Helen started up from her chair and ran to welcome her mother-in-law.

"Dearest Lady Belfield, I am electrified!" she exclaimed.

"You did not say a word in your last letter about coming to London."

"I had no intention of coming when I wrote," replied Constance, shaking hands with Mrs. Baddeley, and then with the two gentlemen.

She told her daughter-in-law of Adrian's return, and of their residence at the Alexandra. Helen blushed faintly at the mention of her jilted lover, and a flood of memories swept across her mind at the sound of his name.

Oh, how long it seemed ago, that old time when she and Adrian were engaged, when her heart was light and glad with a childish pleasure in her conquest and her lover's devotion, and the sunny future that lay before their feet. All was altered now; she had loved and suffered; her pride had been crushed, her spirit broken: and then, all at once, like the awakening of Spring, life had begun again, as if all the world were newly made.

Mrs. Baddeley brought forward her most luxurious chair, and established Lady Belfield in a shady nook by the oriel window, while Helen stood dreaming.

"You find us in rather a dishevelled condition," said Mrs. Baddeley; "we were late home from our ride this morning. Our horses were very fresh, and we were obliged to give them a little extra work. I think we were the very last people in the Row, weren't we, St. Austell?"

She called him St. Austell *tout court*: a freedom which was very objectionable to Lady Belfield.

"I am glad you are riding, Helen," the mother-in-law said gently.

"Yes, it is very nice to ride in the Row when there is no better riding possible. Valentine was so kind as to buy me a horse."

"He only did what was right," said Lady Belfield, wondering why the young wife blushed crimson as she mentioned her husband's gift. "Does he ride with you?"

"Oh, no; his hunters are in Devonshire, you know. He says he hates the Row. Leo and I ride together."

"You have a good groom, I hope."

"No, we have no groom. The man comes round from the livery stables to mount us, and we generally have an escort of some kind," explained Mrs. Baddeley. "We are perfectly safe, I assure you."

Lady Belfield was not to be assured upon this point.

"I think my son is wrong in allowing his wife to ride without a servant," she said gravely.

St. Austell turned the conversation into a pleasanter channel. How long did Lady Belfield contemplate remaining in town,

and what was she going to see? He ran over the names of the theatres—he talked of Hurlingham and Ranelagh, the picture galleries, the latest conjuring trick, the newest thought-reader.

"I am not very eager about amusements," said Lady Belfield. "I want to see as much as I can of my daughter."

Helen's eyes filled at that word "daughter," spoken with extreme tenderness.

"You are too good to me," she faltered. "I wish Valentine were in London to help me make much of you; but he has gone over to Paris for the Longchamps races. You know how devoted he is to racing. I suppose he will be back in two or three days."

"You don't know when he is to be back?"

"I seldom know till within an hour or two of his return. He is so erratic. He says he never likes to forecast his life, to forfeit the privilege of changing his mind. He comes back from Newmarket, or York, or Paris, just as unexpectedly as he comes from his club."

"He is the best of fellows, but I really think he was made for a bachelor," said St. Austell airily. "He has such a thorough appreciation of manly liberty. You must have exacted very little from him in his boyhood, Lady Belfield."

"I hope I never exacted anything from either of my sons," answered Constance gravely.

That light tone of St. Austell's jarred upon her. The man's presence in that room, and his easy familiarity with both sisters, gave her an uncomfortable feeling. She found herself wondering whether he was often there; and whether he was chief among the "escort" of whom Mrs. Baddeley had spoken so confidently.

"Can you go to the opera with me to-morrow evening, Helen?" she asked.

Helen looked at her sister.

"I'm afraid not," said Mrs. Baddeley, "we are booked for a dinner in Park Lane, and a dance in Grosvenor Gardens."

"The next night, then?"

"There is another dance—two dances, on opposite sides of Grosvenor Square," replied Helen; "but I can go with you to the opera before my dances."

"No, I will not allow that. You look fragile enough as it is. I won't cause you any extra fatigue. But do you really go out *every* evening?"

"My dear Lady Belfield, remember it is the very height of the season!" said Mrs. Baddeley. "If we had not a good many engagements now we should be indeed very little in request. When I cease to be wanted at three or four different houses every night in June I shall know that I am on the shelf."

"It is a wretchedly exhausting life, for any young woman," said Lady Belfield.

"It *is* a wretchedly exhausting life; but one must endure it for a month or six weeks in the year, unless one wants to fall out of the ranks altogether. Helen moped horribly till Valentine and I took her in hand, and shook her despondency out of her; and now she is as happy as a bird!"

Lady Belfield contemplated her son's wife thoughtfully for a few moments; and it did not seem to her that the expression of the lovely face was one of perfect serenity. There was a troubled look in the large dark eyes, a nervous restlessness about the mouth.

Mr. Beeching sat in a low chair, teasing Mrs. Baddeley's poodle all this time, and did not commit himself by speech. He had acquired almost a reputation for stupid speechlessness.

The poodle was an artificial personage, spoiled by London hours and high living, *blasé*, cynical. He wore three tufts on his shaven back, and three tufts on his aspiring tail; he wore a silver collar and silver bracelets, and would bite his dearest friend. He had been over-educated, and was supposed at these times to suffer from pressure on the brain. He played the piano, walked upstairs on his hind legs, shut the door, and insulted Mr. Gladstone in dumb show whenever a piece of sugar was offered to him coupled with that statesman's name. It may be supposed, as the performance must have been irksome, that he really detested Mr. Gladstone.

No doubt there are Liberal poodles in London to whom the name of Lord Salisbury is equally odious; but the Tory poodle is the more general ornament of a lady's boudoir.

"Come to breakfast with me to-morrow morning, Helen," said Lady Belfield, when she was going away, after half-an-hour of the shallowest kind of talk, in which Mrs. Baddeley and Lord St. Austell were the chief performers. "You can hardly be engaged at breakfast-time."

"If I were I would give up my engagement for you," replied Helen, with her caressing smile. "I will give up my dance to-morrow night, if you like."

"No, no. You shall make no sacrifices. Come at ten o'clock to-morrow. That will not be too early, will it?"

"No, I always wake early. I never sleep more than four or five hours."

"Very different from me," said Mrs. Baddeley. "I sleep like a dormouse till it is time to put on my habit for the Row."

She gave a great yawn and a sigh of relief presently when the outer door closed upon Lady Belfield.

"That dear soul is quite too charming in Devonshire," she

said; "but she rather palls upon one in London. She requires the background of a mediæval abbey."

"She is the most unselfish woman in this world," protested Helen warmly, and then she turned her back upon the trio—Mr. Beeching, St. Austell, and Leonora—and walked to an open window at the end of the room, and stood looking out, watching Lady Belfield's hired victoria as it turned the corner of the street, with her eyes almost blinded by tears.

St. Austell followed her to the window.

"What a sensitive nature it is which every chance touch can move to pain," he said. "You ought not to expose yourself to this kind of thing, Helen. You ought to be far away from these jarring influences."

Mr. Beeching had found speech by this time, and was exchanging muffled remarks with Mrs. Baddeley, as they shared the attentions and casual snaps of the Tory poodle.

When had Lord St. Austell begun to call Mrs. Belfield by her Christian name?

Helen could not remember the exact moment of that marked change from conventional respect to privileged familiarity. It was in a waltz, perhaps, when, lured by exquisite music, she had held on too long, and had been almost fainting on his shoulder, with the world all melting round her, as if there were no more reality in life, only a sweet vague dimness, the perfume of golden lilies, golden lights glimmering in a pale haze, and his voice murmuring tenderly, "Helen, my Helen."

Was it thus, or in some other way, the change came about? She hardly knew. Nothing in her life seemed to have had a beginning. She had floated along she knew not whither, lulled in balmy zephyrs, lapped in warm sunshine; she had drifted down a tropical river in an atmosphere of dreamland. He called her Helen now as a matter of course; and he told her every day and many times a day that there was something amiss in her life. That which was wrong was her feeble hold upon propriety, her last tenacious clinging to her duty as a wife. Her footsteps were faltering just upon the hither side of the line that severs innocence from guilt. She could still hold up her head and say to herself, "I may be passionately in love with St. Austell, as he is with me; but I am true to my husband all the same, and nothing could ever tempt me to betray him." Telling herself this, she lived in daily commune with the tempter, the man whose name was a synonym for seduction; and who was so much the more dangerous in her case because this time he was profoundly in love.

CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. PONSONBY'S ULTIMATUM

HELEN was ushered into Lady Belfield's sitting-room next morning as the clock struck ten, and found her mother-in-law and Sir Adrian ready to receive her. The breakfast-table had been placed near the open window, looking out upon the Park, with its brilliant flower-beds, palms, and tree-ferns, and its early riders cantering up and down the Row.

Adrian came forward to meet his sister-in-law with frankest greeting; but Helen grew paler as their hands met, and it seemed to him that her beauty had a wan look in the morning light. The freshness had vanished from the young face, and that bright and joyous outlook, the careless happiness of girlhood, which had charmed him at their first meeting, had given place to weariness and languor. It was not the face of a happy wife in the early years of marriage.

Helen grew more at ease presently as they sat at breakfast, reassured by Adrian's fraternal manner. It was a relief to her to find such perfect friendliness in the man she had jilted; and yet her vanity was wounded by the idea that he *could* forgive her so freely, could meet her with frank good-will.

"He could never have cared very much for me," she thought.

His presence recalled bitterest memories. She had been false to him, and for whom? For a man who neglected and abandoned her—left her to Fate and to the chances of evil; left her to run the gauntlet of London society without a husband's protection.

Adrian was eager to see his brother. He had written to Valentine in a friendly spirit twice during the last year—first on New Year's Eve, and again on their mutual birthday; and his brother had answered both letters in a free and easy tone, taking their reconciliation as it were for granted, ignoring the past and the wrong that had been done. And now Adrian yearned after that other half of himself, from which he had so long been separated. He was vexed at Valentine's absence, and still more vexed at Helen's vagueness about her husband's return.

"I'll telegraph to him," he said, "if you'll give me his Paris address."

"I don't know where he is staying."

"You don't know! But surely he has written to you?"

"Yes; but he wrote to me from his club, or from a club that he uses when he is there. I'm not sure that he is a member. I suppose if you telegraph to him at the club he will get your telegram."

"Sooner or later, no doubt; but there may be a considerable delay," answered Adrian. "I want to hasten his return, if I can. Our time is short in London."

Helen gave him the address of the Parisian club, and he went downstairs to send his telegram. Lady Belfield carried off her daughter-in-law for a morning in the picture galleries. She took possession of her son's wife as if in the exercise of a natural right. Helen had promised to be in the Row between twelve and one. St. Austell would be there, no doubt, expecting her. She had parted with him at four o'clock that morning, after a ball, and he had stopped at the carriage-door to ascertain her plans for the day. He knew all about her engagement with Lady Belfield.

"Less than a couple of hours will polish off your mother-in-law," he said; "and you can be in the Row by twelve. You mustn't lose your ride: it's the one thing that keeps us all alive."

She had promised not to lose her ride; but now that she was asked to go to the Academy she had not the courage to refuse.

"I want to have you with me as much as I can while I am in town," said Lady Belfield. "We have seen so little of each other since you have been my daughter. Adrian is full of business this morning, so he cannot come with us."

Helen was glad to escape from Adrian's thoughtful gaze. It seemed to her that he must be able to read all her secrets, that he must know how false and wicked she was, she who had begun her downward course by falsehood to him.

That morning with Lady Belfield was slow torture. The wife's remorseful sense of her own unworthiness changed every tender word into a scorpion. She tried to appear happy and light-hearted, but she felt that her gaiety was a miserable assumption which could hardly deceive anybody. It certainly did not deceive Lady Belfield.

"My dear child, let us sit down," she said. "You are looking so pale and weary. I am afraid you are not well, Helen; that they did not take enough care of you after your long illness."

"Oh, no, it is not that. I am very well; but I was dancing till nearly four o'clock this morning."

"And you are going out again to-night. Do you think it is worth any one's while to lead such a life?"

"I don't know. I suppose it is natural to like dancing and gaiety while one is young. And there is no other kind of life for

me to lead. If I were to stay at home, as I did last year, I should only have leisure to be unhappy, and to fancy myself a deserted wife. When I am out in the world, among a lot of thoughtless people, I too am thoughtless. It is better than thinking bitter thoughts."

"My poor girl, I wish Valentine were fonder of home, and that you two spent more of your lives together. There is something amiss in your present life. I am grieved to see it, I am grieved to speak of it; yet I feel that I ought to speak."

"Oh, please don't say any more," said Helen fretfully. "It can do no good. Valentine has always had his own way, and I have left off thwarting him. I used to beg him to stay at home. I fancied we might be so happy together; and I was so ridiculously fond of him."

"Was fond of him! Why you speak as if your love were a thing of the past."

"No, no, Lady Belfield, you misunderstand. I mean that in those days I had a foolish way of pestering him with my affection. I was too demonstrative, and I thought I could keep him at home of an evening. A fatal mistake. We get on ever so much better now that we each go our own way."

"My love, it is all wrong. It cannot mean happiness for either of you."

"Indeed, you are mistaken; Valentine is perfectly happy."

"And are you perfectly happy?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I am. We are having a brilliant season. Leo and I are invited almost everywhere. It is very pleasant, and——" with a faint sigh, "one has no time to think."

They were sitting in the inner sculpture gallery, where there were very few people, though the other rooms were full. Lady Belfield left at one o'clock, thinking that Helen was tired.

"Shall we drive through the Park before you go in?" Helen asked, as they came to Hyde Park Corner.

"Yes, dear, if you like," and Lady Belfield gave the order.

"Go slowly up and down the drive," Helen said to the coachman, and then added to Lady Belfield: "If there are any people we know we may as well see them."

"By all means; we have half-an-hour to waste before lunch."

Helen was thinking of St. Austell. Would he be there waiting for her? Would he be angry with her for having broken faith with him? She had given him a kind of right over her life from the moment in which she had listened to his unhallowed love. He had the right to be miserable when he was away from her; the right to accuse her of cruelty if she avoided his company.

She had allowed him to tell her of his love; but she had affected to make light of his declaration.

"This means nothing from you," she said; "I should be angry if it were any one else who talked such nonsense."

Under that lightness her lover had seen indications of the deepest feeling, and knew that she was to be won; not so easily won as other victims had been, and so much the more worth winning.

The Row was almost deserted, but a little way past the barracks they met Mrs. Baddeley and Lord St. Austell riding side by side, while Mr. Beeching skulked in the rear on a thick-set, bull-necked, black cob, very smooth and sleek and stoutly built, and having a kind of fanciful resemblance to his rider.

"Everything belonging to Beeching is like him," said one of his particular friends; "his horses are like him, his dogs are like him, his guns are like him, and his furniture is like him. The fellow has his own image and superscription upon everything. When he bothered me about the lines of his new tandem cart I told him not to worry. 'However you have it built, it's sure to come out like you,' I told him: 'and, by Jove, it did.'"

Lord St. Austell was one of the few men who look well on horseback, and yet do not disappoint people when they dismount. He was tall and slim, dressed to perfection in so quiet and subdued a style that nobody had ever succeeded in imitating him. There was an indescribable *cachet*, a subtle neutrality of tint, which the copyist never could attain. To-day he had a languid air as he sauntered slowly along, talking with Mrs. Baddeley, who looked fresh as a June rose, and seemed in high spirits. She was to act for a charity that evening, at one of the most fashionable places in London—half picture-gallery, half ball-room. She was to play Peg Woffington in "Masks and Faces," for the benefit of the Convalescent Chimney Sweepers' Institute, and she was telling St. Austell about her conception of the part and her gowns.

The character was important, but the gowns were the pivot upon which success depended.

"They are my own idea, worked out from Sir Peter Lely," she said; "but that wretched Mrs. Ponsonby had not sent them when I came out this morning. I am in a state of suspense till I see them. They may be failures after all."

"You employ Ponsonby, do you?" asked St. Austell, who was learned in all the ways of women; "I've been told she's dear."

"Dear! She is exorbitant, a perfect harpy! But she is the only woman in London who can make a gown."

"She must be as rich as Crœsus. Lord Pevensey told me the other day that he nearly lost an estate he was negotiating for in Yorkshire, because Mrs. Ponsonby was hankering after it. He was not told who had been bidding against him till after he had

secured the property. 'By Jove, St. Austell, I felt humiliated,' he said, 'to think that I had just missed being outbidden by my wife's dressmaker.'"

"I have no doubt she is richer than Lord Pevensey," replied Leo, laughing. "I am longing to see how she has carried out my ideas. I am like a child that is going to have a new frock for her birthday."

They saw Helen, and pulled up their horses, and the victoria drew up by the rails. They talked for a few minutes, Helen explaining how Lady Belfield had been so kind as to take her to the Academy.

"You might have sent me a message," said Mrs. Baddeley. "Your horse and I both waited half-an-hour for you."

"Yes, I ought to have sent a message. It was very forgetful of me. Poor Ravioli!"

Ravioli was the horse.

"I am glad you find it in your heart to pity Ravioli," said St. Austell, with one of those looks which speak volumes at the initial stage of an intrigue.

Language and looks become much less subtle in later stages.

He timed that pathetic glance at a safe moment when Lady Belfield was talking to Mrs. Baddeley.

Leo was begging her to go to the performance at the Victoria Hall.

"I dare say the acting will be very bad, though we most of us think ourselves geniuses," she said; "but we shall have all the best people in London to see us, and it is for a good cause; so if you and Sir Adrian are disengaged——"

"I believe we are disengaged. It is only as a favour that we are to get stalls for the Lyceum next Saturday, and we are not to go to the Haymarket till to-morrow. It is not so easy to do a round of the theatres as we fancied it would be."

"Then as a *pis aller* come and see 'Masks and Faces' by the Kentish Ramblers and your humble servant. If we don't succeed in making you cry, we are sure to make you laugh."

"Don't be too sure of that," said St. Austell; "there is a dismal state between laughing and crying, which I have seen produced by the performance of your real painstaking amateur. He is just too good to be laughed at, and he is not good enough to draw tears. His performance produces a dreary vacuity of mind, a sense of the intolerable length of time. I think the feeling is most acute during such a piece as 'Plot and Passion,' which, being tedious and long-winded, is a favourite with amateurs."

"You talk like a disappointed man," said Leo. "I have no doubt you tried to act in early youth, and are embittered by the memory of failure."

"No, I was one of those few sensible people who are aware of their incapability beforehand."

"Are you coming home presently, Helen?" asked Mrs. Baddeley.

"She is coming to lunch with me first," answered Lady Belfield; "I'll drive her home in time for tea."

"Please don't keep her late. She has the Victoria Hall and two parties after. To-night is one of our field nights," said Mrs. Baddeley, and then with a smile and a wave of her whip hand, she yielded to the impatience of her horse, and trotted away, her two cavaliers accompanying her.

St. Austell left her at the Piccadilly end of the Row, but Beeching rode back to Wilkie Mansions and lingered at the door when he had helped her to dismount, and had delivered her horse to a hireling from the livery yard.

"Come in and see my gowns," said Leo; "they must have arrived by this time, or I am in for a fiasco. Come and tell me what you think of my gowns, and then I will give you some lunch."

Mrs. Baddeley was eminently hospitable; her little luncheons were delightful in a small and studiously simple way. She gave herself no airs of epicureanism, but her roast chicken or her cutlets à la Maintenon, and her mayonnaise of salmon or lobster were always perfection. Even a shoulder of lamb and a custard pudding had a grace on her table, and satisfied her admiring guest. She rarely dined at home, and so her cook was able to concentrate her energies on that wholesome two o'clock meal which everybody eats with a better appetite than the evening's elaborate banquet.

She ran gaily upstairs, Mr. Beeching following, ashamed to confess that his less agile legs would have preferred the lift. She opened the door with her latchkey, and pounced upon the page, who was discovered in the lobby reading the adventures of "Sixteen String Jack," reclining in a luxurious bamboo chair, with his heels on the card table.

"Get up, you horrid little monkey," cried his mistress indignantly. "Has the dressmaker sent my gowns?"

"No, ma'am. There ain't no basket come, but there was a young lady brought this;" and the boy snatched up a brass salver, took a letter out of his pocket, put it on the salver, and handed it with due ceremony.

"A letter," exclaimed Leo angrily, as she tore open the envelope. "What can the woman mean by writing?"

Mrs. Ponsonby's meaning was clear enough.

With profound respect she reminded Mrs. Baddeley that her account had been running a long time, and that she had not received a cheque from her honoured customer for over a twelve-

month. The costumes were finished and ready for delivery; but on referring to her ledger she had discovered that Mrs. Baddeley was much deeper in debt than she had supposed, and she must therefore regretfully decline to send the costumes unless Mrs. Baddeley favoured her with at least a hundred pounds on account.

Leo read the letter as she passed into her drawing-room, followed by Mr. Beeching, who felt that the atmosphere was tempestuous.

"You are too good to ask me to stay," he muttered, "but I have just remembered a particular appointment at the Junior Carlton."

He was going, but she stopped him with her hand on his coat sleeve.

"You are not such a poltroon as to run away because I'm in trouble, are you, Beeching?" she asked contemptuously.

She called him Beeching, or Joe, indifferently, with a familiarity which seemed half scornful, but which he liked, nevertheless, in his dull way.

"I'll stop if you like," he said. "What's the row?"

He had seen her in trouble before to-day, and had been ordered to help her, and the result had been duly recorded on the debit side of his bank-book. He could see the figures on the clean white page now, as he stood there, helpless and half reluctant. Nothing had come of that former chivalry on his part; nothing except that he was called Joe, or Beeching, and was occasionally bitten by Tory, the poodle.

Tory was under a sofa now, represented by a pair of fiery yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness. Tory had taken it into his over-educated head to detest Mr. Beeching.

"What's the row?" he asked again, as Leo pored over the letter.

"The row is, that I shall be ruined, humiliated, disgraced, unless I can produce a hundred pounds in the next hour or two. Does the creature think I keep hundred-pound notes under my pillow?"

"I don't suppose she cares where you keep 'em as long as she gets 'em," replied Beeching broodingly, bending down to poke his whip-handle at Tory under the sofa, and receiving a growl and a glare from that celebrity for his pains. "You'll have to pacify her somehow, I suppose," he went on, still intent upon Tory. "If you can't give her money you must give her money's worth. You've got your diamonds."

He seated himself on the carpet at this juncture, in order to be nearer Tory, who was waxing furious.

"Of course I have my diamonds, and I must wear them to-night. Everybody knows about them——"

"Well, not *all* about them," muttered Beeching, under his breath.

"Everybody knows I have them, and will expect me to wear them. What sweet things would be said about me if I *didn't* wear them. My diamonds, indeed! I am to take my diamonds to Mrs. Ponsonby. Upon my word, Beeching, I feel grateful to you for the generous suggestion."

"Yah!" cried Beeching sharply; not at this stab, but at a very tangible bite from the aggravated poodle.

"Luncheon is on the table. Are you going to sit there teasing Tory all the afternoon, or are you coming to lunch with me?" asked Mrs. Baddeley, suddenly changing the conversation.

Mr. Beeching got up, and followed her to the dining-room, looking the very image of sheepishness. It was only on the other side of an Oriental curtain, the quaintest, snuggest little room, fenced off from all rough winds that blow by perforated sandal-wood screens and clusters of tall palms. On the small round table, among quaint old silver and hothouse flowers, there appeared a dainty little luncheon of salmon cutlets, a duckling, with all accompaniments in perfection, and a bottle of G. H. Mumm, delicately wrapped in an embroidered d'oyley. The glass was Venetian, the plates and dishes were Wedgewood.

Mr. Beeching ate his luncheon, and fed Tory, and while the salmon and duckling were being discussed there was not another word spoken about Mrs. Ponsonby, or that hundred pounds which had to be found for her; only Mr. Beeching observed that his hostess, although she ministered delicately to his wants, ate hardly anything herself, and pushed away her plate with a heartbroken air which made him feel very uncomfortable.

"Don't mind me," she said, when she caught him looking at her. "The difficulty must be faced somehow. As you say, I have my diamonds. I may have to humiliate myself so far as to offer that odious woman one of my bracelets as a security for her debt."

This was a concession to the stringency of Fate, and Mr. Beeching felt that the lady was becoming more reasonable.

"Was Peg Woffington the sort of person who would wear diamonds?" he asked, presently.

"She was a famous actress, and she was very beautiful. I leave you to judge."

"Yes, I suppose she would have diamonds. They always do. But are there not stage jewels that you could hire?"

"Stage jewels! *I* wear stage jewels! When every chorus girl in London wears diamonds of the first water! I wonder that you don't know me better."

She leant across the table to fill his glass for him. She had filled it so often with that friendly, almost motherly air, that he

had finished the bottle unawares, not knowing that his hostess had only sipped half a glass to keep him in countenance. He began to be more sympathetic than he had been before luncheon, and to be really concerned about Mrs. Baddeley's dilemma.

A hundred pounds. Such a sum was a mere bagatelle to a man who counted his thousands by the hundred, and felt a little uncomfortable when he began upon a fresh hundred thousand, just as humble poverty does when it changes a sovereign. A hundred pounds more or less could not make any difference to him; and yet he did not like lending that beggarly sum to Mrs. Baddeley, intensely as he admired her. He had lent her a good many hundreds before, sometimes for Mrs. Ponsonby, sometimes for the Oriental warehouse, sometimes for the livery stable. She had not paid him, and he had not expected or even wished to be paid; but he had expected that she would be grateful. He expected to be favoured exclusively as one who had helped her in the hour of need; and he had not been so favoured. She had allowed him to haunt her drawing-room, and to go about with her as a kind of unofficial purse-bearer, paying for carriages, and opera boxes, and picnic luncheons, and gloves, and frivolities of all kinds, and scarcely getting thanked for his pains. He was so inordinately rich that such outlays were not supposed to count.

That which hit him hardest was the idea that St. Austell was preferred to him; that, adore as faithfully as he might, Lord St. Austell had but to smile his all-conquering smile, and Joe Beeching's devotion was forgotten.

"I believe that all I am good for in your life is to play propriety when you go about with St. Austell," he said one day, in a savage humour.

"My dearest Beeching, how can you talk so wildly? Do you suppose I am in love—I, Leonora Baddeley—with Lord St. Austell. Do you forget that I have a dear, good husband toiling for me in India?"

"I think some of us forget him occasionally," growled Beeching.

And now to-day, ruminating on that question of the cheque, to write or not to write, Mr. Beeching thought also of Lord St. Austell. He had seen that gentleman wavering in his allegiance to the elder sister, had seen him transfer his devotion to the younger sister; and he told himself that as a rival St. Austell was out of the running.

He felt more kindly disposed after the duckling and champagne, which were both excellent after their kind. He trifled with some olives and helped himself to a glass of claret, a wine he had himself chosen for Mrs. Baddeley—and paid for. She took all such contributions in the lightest way, as a flower

absorbs dew, taking no heed of the giver. He looked askant at her as he sipped his wine. How handsome she was, and how well she looked in her habit; and there were tears in her eyes, yes, absolutely tears. She was not crying about her gowns. It was the sense of humiliation which crushed her.

"Don't be unhappy," he said; "I'll go and see this woman, and see what can be done. Do you owe her much?"

"I'm afraid I do owe her a good deal."

"Tell me the worst. Give me her last account."

"You'll be shocked, I'm afraid," said Leo, taking a paper out of her devonport. "Her prices are extortionate, and I have been so unlucky at all the races this year. Last year I paid her a heap of money after Ascot, and another heap—well, over a hundred each time—after Doncaster."

"I'll see what I can do," said Beeching, making a wry face as he looked at the total.

It was just under nine hundred pounds.

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. BEECHING'S ULTIMATUM

Mr. Beeching took a hansom, and drove to a street off Cavendish Square—a street well known to the best-dressed women in London. As he drove along he debated what he should do for Mrs. Baddeley. He was so inherently a man of business—albeit he had never inked his fingers in a City office—that it irked him to fling a hundred pounds into this harpy's maw, as a sop is flung to Cerberus. It would please him better to make some kind of bargain with the harpy, even if the transaction should cost him more than a hundred pounds. He wanted to get some advantage for his money.

He sent his card to Mrs. Ponsonby, and was at once admitted into the very sanctuary of the house near Cavendish Square—the lady's private room, study, office, or boudoir, whichever she might choose to call it; and here he was received with gracious smiles by Mrs. Ponsonby herself.

She needed no explanation of his errand; for she had seen him in attendance upon the handsome Mrs. Baddeley at race-meetings and other places of public resort, whither Mrs. Ponsonby went occasionally to see how the world was using her customers. It was there that she made up her mind about

all her doubtful patronesses, as to how far they might be worthy of her confidence. That which she saw at Hurlingham or at Sandown served as the chart by which she steered in dangerous seas. In the dressmaker's estimation of Mrs. Baddeley—whose account was a bagatelle compared with some other accounts—Mr. Beeching was an important factor. He had never crossed her threshold until to-day, and she felt pleased with herself for having written the letter that had brought him there.

She was not so pleased, however, after a quarter of an hour's conversation with Mr. Beeching.

Of money on account he would not give her a sixpence. If she were prepared to settle her account upon equitable terms—say thirty-three per cent.—he would give her his cheque and take Mrs. Baddeley a receipt in full of all demands. If she were not disposed to accept this offer, she must look to Mrs. Baddeley alone for her money. He would have nothing to do with it. He knew what dressmakers' bills were, and the usurious profits they exacted. He was assured that thirty-three per cent. would pay for all that she had supplied, and leave a margin of profit. At any rate, that was his ultimatum. Mrs. Baddeley had given him plenary powers. As for the gowns for this evening, Mrs. Baddeley could do very well without them. It was by her acting, not by her costume, she was to please her audience. It was not to be supposed that he was to be frightened into paying an exorbitant account.

Mrs. Ponsonby held out for a long time. She was not in the habit of compromising an account. She was in no immediate want of money. She meant to have her due. Mrs. Baddeley would be obliged to pay her.

"My good soul, it is all very well to talk," replied Mr. Beeching, who was more at his ease in a business interview than in Society; "but can you get blood out of a stone? Can you get nine hundred pounds out of an officer's wife—a lady whose husband is being roasted alive at Candahar or somewhere in order to keep body and soul together? *You* have made your mistake in trusting a lady in Mrs. Baddeley's sad position, and you ought to think yourself uncommonly lucky if you get a clear third of your account without law expenses or bother of any kind."

"Mrs. Baddeley may not have money, but she has friends," argued the dressmaker doggedly.

"No doubt she has friends—hosts of friends—but I take it I am the only one among 'em who would pay six-and-eightpence in the pound to get her out of a difficulty. One thing I can assure you, Mrs. Ponsonby, I won't pay seven shillings. I have made my final offer."

He had his cheque-book in the breast-pocket of his summer overcoat, the end showing distinctly against the silk lining.

He touched the book lightly as he spoke, and that touch decided Mrs. Ponsonby.

She had felt some uneasiness about Mrs. Baddeley's account, and it was something to get the cost price of her materials, with the advantage of having dressed a lady who was known and admired in a particular set, and who had brought Mrs. Ponsonby a good deal of custom.

"I should be sorry to disoblige a lady for whom I have a great liking," she said, with a patronizing air; "and rather than do that I will accept your cheque."

"And give me a receipt in full of all demands?"

"Yes, so far as the account you have there. The gowns that are to be delivered this afternoon are not in that account."

"What are they to cost?"

Mrs. Ponsonby looked at a document on her devonport.

"One hundred and seventy-seven pounds eighteen shillings and ninepence."

"I'll add sixty-five pounds to your cheque, and you can cross Mrs. Baddeley out of your books altogether."

"What! I am to take a third of my account and to lose my customer."

"Not at all. She says there is no one in London but you who can make her a gown. She will go on dealing with you, I have no doubt; but if she takes my advice she will always pay ready money, and always know what she is going to pay when she gives the order. You'll both of you find that system ever so much pleasanter."

"Not if my prices are to be cut down in this absurd way," replied Mrs. Ponsonby.

There was a further discussion; but Mr. Beeching's logic and his cheque-book prevailed. He wrote his cheque, got the two receipted accounts, saw the milliner's basket deposited on the top of a cab, with a young woman in charge of it, and then drove back to Wilkie Mansions. He passed the four-wheeler and the big basket before he reached the Park.

Mrs. Baddeley was in her drawing-room, pale, anxious, but lovely, in a Japanese tea-gown, lime-blossom green, under a cloud of coffee-coloured lace.

"Dearest Beeching, have you got me my gowns?" she gasped, with clasped hands, as he stood just within the doorway.

Tory, always eager to distinguish himself, rushed at the half-open door and banged it, and then came back to his mistress on his hind legs to demand his accustomed reward of biscuit or sugar, but Leo was too agitated to think of Tory.

"Your gowns will be here in ten minutes. I passed them on the road. Could you think I would allow you to be unhappy for the sake of a paltry hundred?" said Beeching tenderly. "Oh, Leonora, how little you know me!"

This was a plunge. He had never called her Leonora before.

Tory gave a short indignant bark, either at Mr. Beeching's familiarity or at his mistress's neglect.

"I have done something more than you asked," continued Beeching, growing boastful. "I have got you out of debt. You don't owe Mrs. Ponsonby a shilling. There is the old account, and there is the account for your new gowns, both receipted."

"You darling! How can I ever be grateful enough? How can I ever repay you?"

"You might repay me easily if you liked, Leonora. Show me a little of that favour which you lavish so freely upon your sister's lover. Give me some of those smiles you give to St. Austell. Let me be something more to you than a stop-gap and a convenience. Leo, you know that I adore you."

He drew nearer to her, regardless of Tory, whose yellow eyes were shining ominously.

"You won't refuse me one kiss, Leo?"

"One! Half-a-dozen, if you like."

He sprang to clasp her waist, to press those exquisite lips, and was met by a cold black muzzle, which touched him for an instant, and was withdrawn just as it widened into a growl, preliminary to a snap. Mrs. Baddeley had snatched up Tory. He was to her as Medusa's head was to Minerva, and made her almost as invincible.

"My dear Beeching, I hope your kindness in helping me out of a difficulty does not make you forget that I have a husband in India," she said, with dignity; and Beeching stood before her, crestfallen and angry, but unable to reply.

He began to understand that he was to write cheques whenever they were urgently wanted; but that he was to get nothing but afternoon tea and Tory's attentions for his money.

"You are very cruel," he said sulkily. "Good day."

"You'll come to see the play, dear Beeching," she said, as he was departing.

"I'll be —— if I do!"

"Oh, I hope you won't be *that;* but I know you'll come to see Peg Woffington."

He met the milliner's basket and the young woman just emerging from the lift. He had none of that generous glow which is said to follow the doing of a good action. He felt savage at being foiled.

"The next time she's in a difficulty she may whistle for me," he said to himself; but when eight o'clock came he could no more keep away from the Victoria Hall than a moth can keep away from a candle. The hall was so near his chambers in the Albany. He had not even to order his brougham. He just slipped on his overcoat, took one from half-a-dozen guinea tickets on his chimney-piece, and walked to the place of enter-

tainment. Carriages were setting down at the entrance. Lady Belfield, Helen, and Sir Adrian were going in just in front of him, amongst a fashionable crowd. His stall was next but one to Helen's, and St. Austell occupied the seat between them.

"How odd that we should be side by side," said his lordship, loud enough for Lady Belfield to hear.

Helen made no answer. She was not yet mistress of those arts of hypocrisy which enable a woman to glide from flirtation to flirtation, and from intrigue to intrigue, with a bold front and a lofty crest. She had not passed the border line of guilt, and yet her head was bent by the burden of conscious shame. That slight droop of the head and pensive air enhanced her beauty, in an age when brazen mirthfulness is the commonest attribute of woman. She had a fragile look, like a tall white lily, bent almost to breaking. Some of her friends said she looked consumptive, and would not last many seasons.

She knew that St. Austell had taken infinite trouble to get that stall next hers. He had been with her at tea-time to find out the number of her seat; had been with her, they two alone, in the Japanese drawing-room—with not even Tory to make a diversion from perilous sentimentality—and then had driven off to the hall in a hansom to get his own number changed; and now he expected her to act surprise.

"Masks and Faces" was listened to with polite approval by people who remembered Fanny Stirling in the heyday of her charms as Peg Woffington; by people who could hardly dissociate the character from Mrs. Bancroft; and by other people who had seen Mrs. Bernard Beere. As for Mrs. Baddeley, her diamonds and her gowns were lovely. Her acting was easy and refined, and utterly undramatic; but she was above the level of her fellow-performers, and was supposed by them and by herself to be taking the town by storm. Applause is given so freely to amateurs, since approval means nothing and compromises nobody. People who have been coaxed into buying guinea stalls for an old familiar play must at least pretend to enjoy themselves; and the audience was decidedly smart, and could console itself with the idea that it was the right thing to be there.

Lady Belfield and her daughter-in-law parted in the vestibule. Helen was going on to a party in Regent Terrace with her sister. She had to go to Mrs. Baddeley's dressing-room and wait there while that lady changed her dress, which would be rather a long business, no doubt. St. Austell offered to take her to her sister's room; but Adrian gave her his arm, as if by a superior right.

"If you'll take care of my mother, I'll be back in a few minutes," he said to St. Austell, as he walked off with Helen.

It was the first time she had touched his arm since they were affianced lovers, and her fingers trembled faintly as they rested on his sleeve. She had so many causes for agitation. St. Austell's pursuit—unobtrusive, but fatal; her fear of her husband's return, which might occur at any moment; and now her dread of this grave, earnest brother-in-law, whom she had wronged in the past, and from whom she shrank in the present as from one who had an occult power to read her heart.

"You are looking pale and tired, Helen," said Adrian, as they went along a passage leading to the back of the hall. "Must you really go to a party to-night?"

"I am due at two. There is Lady Glandore's musical evening, which I would not miss for worlds, and a dance afterwards—a late dance—which means coffee and carriages at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"I believe you are killing yourself with this kind of life."

"Oh, but it is only a spurt: it lasts so short a time. 'A rose's brief bright life of joy,' as somebody has said."

"And you go from party to party—from crowd to crowd—alone?"

"What do you mean by alone? I am under my elder sister's wing, always."

"I don't think that wing is quite enough to shelter you, Helen. I don't like to think of you in society without your husband."

"I should see very little of society if I waited for Valentine to take me about. Do you know that I should have gone melancholy mad a few months ago if Leo had not come to my rescue?"

"That is very sad, Helen. I must talk to my brother——"

"Don't! It would only make bad blood between us. It is all over with us as a devoted couple; it was all over directly after our honeymoon. I was so fond of him, and I thought we were going to be so happy together—not commonplace married people, leading commonplace semi-detached lives, but wedded lovers. I soon found out my mistake."

"But you have only been married two years. You cannot be tired of each other yet. Valentine is too much accustomed to have his own way, and to seek his own amusement; but I have no doubt he loves you as fondly as ever."

"You have not seen us together, or you would know better."

"I cannot believe that there is any change in his feelings," persisted Adrian; "but I think the kind of life you are leading is calculated to estrange him. The knowledge that you are going about in society without him will make him more and more careless of his home, more intent upon his own pleasures."

They were at the door of the dressing-room by this time.

"Good-night," said Helen, offering Adrian her hand.

He pressed it gently, with a brother's kindly grasp.

"We may meet again, perhaps, before morning. I saw Glandore at the Carlton, and he asked me to look in at her ladyship's party, and hear Patti."

"*Au revoir*, then," said Helen, with an undefinable feeling that Adrian's presence would spoil her evening.

He had told her that he did not approve of her butterfly life; and she could not shake off the idea that he could read her thoughts and knew the downward road on which she was travelling.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE TERRACE

It took Mrs. Baddeley a considerable time to transform herself from Peg Woffington to a lady of the period. The concert was over in Regent Terrace when the sisters arrived. Patti had sung and departed, and a stream of smart people were flowing out of the lofty hall on their way to dances; but the pleasantest feature of Lady Glandore's parties was the lamplit terrace, where her ladyship's guests sauntered up and down, or sat about in friendly groups among groves of palms and pyramids of exotics, and listened to a band stationed at the end of the terrace. Whatever band was best and most fashionable was to be heard at Lady Glandore's; and the change from the brilliant rooms and operatic music, the crowd, and the dazzle of the house, to this cool region of palms and flowers and multitudinous lamps clustering among the greenery, and Japanese umbrella canopies, and little tables provided with strawberries and cream, and talk, and flirtation, and iced drinks, and stirring national melodies, was a change that delighted everybody. And there, across the shadowy Park, in darkly solemn grandeur, showed the dense bulk of Abbey and Senate House; the place where the dead, who seem so great, are lying; and the place where the living, who seem so small, are trying to talk themselves into fame and immortality.

There were many people in London who preferred Lady Glandore's terrace to the smartest dance of the season, and who lingered and loitered there between lamplight and shadow, strolling up and down, or leaning on the balustrade, dreamily

contemplative of that dark bulk of towers and roofs, touched here and there with points of vivid light.

Mrs. Baddeley was neither dreamy nor contemplative, and the only ideas the Abbey or the Senate House awakened in her mind were that death in any form, even when glorified in marble, was an inevitable nuisance, and that politics were perhaps a still greater bore. She was of the earth earthy, and always made the most of the present moment. She speedily took possession of one of the strawberry-and-cream tables, and had a cluster of admirers about her, whom she sent on errands to the supper-room.

"I am going to frighten you all by eating a most prodigious supper," she cried. "Remember I have been acting comedy and tragedy, laughing and crying, and loving and suffering, for three hours, and have had nothing but one poor little split and a teaspoonful of brandy. I am on the verge of exhaustion. What, is that you, Beeching?" she cried, as a dark figure and an expanse of shirt-front rose up in the shadow of a neighbouring palm, like the ghost in the "Corsican Brothers." "I did not think I should see you here to-night. How did you like my Peg?"

She was lifting a champagne tumbler to her rosy lips as she spoke, and Beeching thought she was alluding to some particular order of drink.

"How did you like Peg Woffington—and—my gowns?" she said impatiently.

"I suppose it was all very fine, but I ain't much of a judge of anything but a burlesque."

"Oh, but I hope I made you cry," said Mrs. Baddeley, attacking a plateful of delicacies, which a practical admirer had collected for her: foie-gras, chicken, lobster salad, all on the same plate.

"It saves time," he said; "and one don't seem to be eating so much," to which Leo laughingly agreed.

"When I have finished my supper I mean to wallow in strawberries and cream for the rest of the evening," she said, with frank vulgarity; "and you will all have to amuse me. I am much too exhausted to do any talking myself."

"Then I'm afraid you must be at death's door," retorted Beeching.

"Good gracious!" cried Leo, starting up suddenly and looking about her.

"Have you dropped anything?" cried a chorus of admirers. "Your fan—your handkerchief?"

"No, it's my sister. I'm chaperoning her, don't you know? poor young thing, and I haven't seen her since we left the cloak-room."

"Oh, she's quite safe," said Beeching, in his slow sullen voice.

"I saw her at the other end of the terrace—the dark end—looking at the view, with St. Austell."

"I'm afraid I ought to go and hunt them up presently," said Mrs. Baddeley, pushing away her plate with a sigh of satisfaction; "and now, you dear good Colonel, you may go and get me some cream and things—whatever looks nicest. You are an admirable caterer. St. Austell is a dear fellow, but it's unlucky he has made himself such a bad reputation."

"I don't think he took much trouble about it," answered Beeching. "I fancy it came naturally."

"Such a pity," sighed Leo. "He is so handsome, and distinguished, and clever—so altogether *nice*"—as if the last word expressed supreme merit; "and yet people will talk about him, and it's almost dangerous for a young married woman to be civil to him."

"*You* are not afraid, though," said Mr. Mountnessing, a man about town, who was very devoted to Mrs. Baddeley, but who had never imperilled his peace of mind or depleted his purse for any woman living. "You are uncommonly civil to him."

"Oh, I don't count. I am a Bohemian of the Bohemians. I make no distinctions. I know so thoroughly well how to take care of myself," said Leo, devouring an iced soufflé.

"Upon my word, I believe you do," said Mr. Beeching, to which the chorus agreed.

"But my sister is younger than I am, and knows very little of the world, and ought to be looked after," said Leo, attacking a pine-apple cream. "Not nearly so good as the soufflé, Colonel; you should have brought me more of the soufflé."

"And Mrs. Belfield has not the advantage of a husband in India," said Colonel Cotterell.

"No, indeed, poor thing!" agreed Leo. "A neglectful husband at home is not nearly so great a protection for a wife as a dear kind fellow in India, toiling for one under a tropical sun."

"So touching!" said the Colonel.

There were fewer lamps and less people at that end of the terrace where Helen leaned against the stone balustrade, looking across the low level Park, with its parallel rows of lamps, like strings of jewels hanging across the darkness, and its distant boundary of Gothic pinnacles and dark walls, pierced with spots of light.

St. Austell was by her side. They had been in the same spot for nearly an hour. They had talked of many things, beginning in the lightest strain, Helen intending that there should be only the lightest talk between them that night, such talk as all the world might hear. Yet they had drifted somehow from gaiety to seriousness, from airiest talk of their neighbours to tenderest

talk of themselves—and from seriousness they had lapsed into silence.

She leaned her chin upon her hand, gazing at the distant Abbey, with eyes dimmed by tears; but it was not the associations of that solemn pile which moved her. It was no thought of the dead lying there, or of all that the living had lost by the death of greatness. It was of herself and of her own sorrows she thought, and of the lover who stood by her side, and whose lips had been pleading to her as never mortal lips had pleaded before, with a silvery eloquence that thrilled and subjugated her senses and her soul.

What was that rough power, the mere force of a vigorous nature and a dominant will, by which Valentine had conquered her allegiance and won her to himself, compared with this tender and spiritual charm, the fascination of a man who seemed all intellect and emotion, a creature compounded of fire and light, rather than of gross earthy substances. She had never known what love meant until this magical voice whispered in her ear, until this light hand touched her own, and conquered at a touch.

"There are tears in your eyes, Helen," he said, trying gently to draw her face towards his own. "I know it, though I cannot see them. Love, why are you crying? I tell you again the gulf is not impassable. All good things are on the other side. If your life were happy—if your fate were what it ought to be—I would not ask you what I have asked to-night. But I have seen how you are ignored and neglected—I know how little there is to lose—while for me there is all to gain, and for you—at least this much—to be loved and cherished and honoured as you deserve to be."

"Honoured! Oh, how can you use that word?" she said, with a sob.

"Why should I not use it? Do you think, dearest, if you were to make this sacrifice for me, I should not honour you so much the more for that sacrifice than for all else that is lovely in your nature?"

And then he went on with arguments that have been worn threadbare in the cause of illicit love, but which always seem original to the yielding ear of the woman who listens. He went on in that low melodious voice which had charmed honour and conscience to fatal oblivion many a time before to-night; the voice of the accomplished seducer, who has just heart enough to fancy himself eternally in love once a year, and who pleads to his mistress in all the glow and fervour of a passion which seems as true as a boy's first love, and which is foredoomed to change and forgetfulness even in its golden dawn. He talked as a man who had never loved before, and could never cease to

love. He believed in himself, and the reality of his own transient emotions gave him all the force of sincerity. He was sincere, only it was the sincerity of a single season, and would be gone and forgotten before next year's roses bloomed on Lady Glandore's terrace.

Helen heard, and seemed on the point of yielding. He had been imploring her to leave a husband who neglected her, who was obviously unworthy of her fidelity, and to trust her lot to him. They would leave England together—for ever, if she chose. She should not be made unhappy by the vicinity of people she knew, or who knew anything about her. He cared not where his lot was cast so long as he was by her side. He had been told that if he wanted to escape early death he ought to winter in the East—Egypt, Algiers, or Ceylon. Would she not go with him? They could spend the early autumn in Northern Italy, and then in October they could start for Ceylon —a land where all things would be new, where life would be as fresh and full of wonder as if they were children again. They would live for each other, apart from society, under an assumed name. No one need ever know their history.

"We would have no history except the story of our love," he said.

She listened with drooping eyelids, listened with one hand locked in his, listened almost in silence. Yes, she could imagine that life which he described, a life in the liberty of strange lands, in perpetual sunshine, among picturesque people; a life for ever changing, for ever new, and brimming over with love; such a life as she had fancied possible in that long honeymoon among Swiss mountains and lakes, when she had waited as a slave upon her Sultan, made happy by a smile or a careless caress. She had fancied herself happy in those days, and had been a willing slave; but he who now pleaded to her was to be her slave, and she was to be Sultana. His love was devoted, reverential, even; she felt, for the first time, what it was to be young, and beautiful, and adored.

St. Austell looked his best in that dim light. The delicate features, the pale complexion, somewhat wan and haggard, after many seasons of reckless dissipation; the dreamy blue-grey eyes, the refined mouth and chin, and the high intellectual brow, on which the hair grew thinly, were all characteristic of a type that women call "interesting." Helen felt the charm of that emotional countenance as deeply as she felt the magic of that musical voice. She stood by his side in silence, letting him plead, letting him clasp her hand, letting him assure himself of victory.

The band was at the other end of the terrace, and it was near that end that Lady Glandore and her friends clustered in little

groups, which were rapidly thinning. The sound of a waltz came brokenly, from the distance, to those two in their solitude. They heard nothing but that fitful ebb and flow of melody, no sound of voices; till a voice close to them startled them like a peal of thunder.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Helen," said Mr. Belfield, "and I began to think Adrian had made a fool of me when he told me you were to be here."

The two brothers were standing side by side in the uncertain light of the little gold-coloured lamps dotted among the palms, and twinkling among the flower beds. They stood side by side, clad exactly alike in their evening dress, like and yet unlike. Valentine, broad-shouldered, vigorous-looking, taller than his brother by an inch or two; Adrian, slender, fragile, with features delicate to attenuation. It was as if spirit and flesh were embodied in two different forms.

Helen's voice faltered as she greeted her husband, but a little agitation was only natural at so unexpected a meeting.

"When did you come back, Val?" she asked. "It isn't like you to look me up at a party."

"Of course it isn't like me," he answered, with a carelessness which reassured that guilty heart. "I should not be here if it was not for Adrian. I went to find him at his hotel before going to my club, and he made me come here with him instead of going to the club with me, as I wanted him to do. How white you are looking, Helen."

"It is the light of the lamps," she faltered.

"Then they must be dooced unbecoming lamps. How-d'ye-do, St. Austell?"

The two men nodded to each other; but St. Austell kept in the background, leaning against the balustrade. It was just possible for him to avoid shaking hands with Mr. Belfield without appearing constrained or particular in his conduct. It would seem almost that he held himself aloof from delicate feeling, loth to interrupt the meeting between husband and wife.

Mrs. Baddeley came sweeping along with her satin train trailing on the gravel, and with Mr. Beeching, Colonel Cotterell, and Mr. Mountnessing in attendance upon her.

"Do you know that we are outstaying everybody?" she exclaimed, "and I have no doubt Lady Glandore is dying to get rid of us all and go to the Duchess's ball. What, Valentine, is that you? I am glad you are back again. Helen, do you feel fit for going on to Grosvenor Gardens?"

"No; I shall go nowhere else to-night. I am tired to death."

Not a word of satisfaction at having her husband back again;

no reference to him in her reply. Adrian marked the omission, and wondered at it. Was love dead between those two? The fire that had burned so strongly that night by the river; the flame to which he had sacrificed his own rights—was it quite extinct? He looked at Helen thoughtfully. She was no less lovely than in that old time when he had loved her; but he saw the beautiful face with a clearer, calmer eye now, and he saw weakness of character in every line—a sweet, lovable, yielding nature, perhaps, but not a woman for any man to build his hopes upon, not a woman for whom to venture all things.

Adrian had a good many opportunities for observing his sister-in-law after that evening at Lady Glandore's, and every new meeting only convinced him the more that all was not well with her. St. Austell's shadow followed her like a blight; and yet Adrian had never seen anything in her conduct which would justify him in remonstrating with her, or even in warning her against Lord St. Austell. She could hardly refuse to know her sister's friends while she was chaperoned by her sister; and St. Austell was an old friend of Major and Mrs. Baddeley's.

He took the opportunity of a *tête-à-tête* lunch with Valentine at the Junior Carlton, to speak of his married life.

"You are quite happy, Val?" he asked. "Your marriage has realized all your hopes?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it has. I don't know very precisely what my hopes were. I only know that I was desperately in love, and that you were a good fellow to give me the field, and are a still better fellow for forgiving me as you have done."

He stretched across the table to shake hands with his brother, with more feeling than he was wont to exhibit.

"Time has been very good to me, Val. I am heart-whole again, and I can think of Helen as my sister, and love her as a sister should be loved. I can never forget that she is the first woman I ever cared for."

"How about the second, Adrian?"

"There is no second yet. I will not say of myself that I shall never love again. Life means mutability, and so long as a man lives he may change. I can't help wishing, Val, that you and Helen were a little less fashionable. I don't like your semi-detached way of living."

"My dear soul, we live as most of our fellow-creatures live," answered Valentine lightly. "I am not the kind of man to be tied to any woman's apron-string, wife or mistress; to stand in doorways while my wife dances; to sit out plays I am sick of while my wife looks on; or to jog up and down the Row at

her side while she nods good morning to all the silly people in London, and shows off the last fashion in riding-habits. If Helen and I are to hang together for the rest of our lives, we must be free to enjoy ourselves after our own ideas. She has an excellent chaperon, and I am letting her sow her wild oats. She will be tired of gadding about in a season or two."

"And when she is tired of gadding about, is she to sit by the fire—alone?"

"My dear Adrian, don't lecture. Who knows? By that time I may be tired of knocking about London, and may sit by the fire and smoke—or take to books, like you. In the meantime, Helen and I get on capitally."

"Yes; and she gets on capitally with men who are ever so much more attentive to her than you are—men who don't mind looking on when she dances, and don't mind jogging up and down the Row. St. Austell, for instance."

Valentine frowned, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't suppose you can make me jealous?" he said. "I am not that kind of person. My wife may accept as much admiration as she likes from other men. I know her heart is mine."

He smiled, recalling his slave's devotion; her delight at a kind word, her blushing pleasure at a casual kiss. He forgot that those things belonged to his experiences of last year. He had not even noticed the growing change in his wife's manner, so completely was he absorbed in himself and his own pleasures.

"Indeed, Valentine, I have never doubted Helen's affection for you; but I think she deserves a little more of your company—a little more of your care. She is too young and too beautiful to stand alone in London society."

"Bosh! A good woman always knows how to take care of herself. It is only the bad ones that want looking after."

Adrian was silent. He felt that he had said as much as he could safely say to Valentine; but there was something which he meant to say to Helen before he went back to Devonshire.

He rode in the Row the day before he left London, to try a saddle-horse which he had bought at Tattersall's on the previous afternoon. He rode early, and was surprised to meet his sister-in-law coming in at the Kensington gate, quite alone, as the clocks were striking nine.

"I heard you were to be at two dances last night, Helen, so I hardly expected to see you out so early," he said.

"I couldn't sleep," she answered; "so it was just as well to have my ride before the herd came out."

She had flushed suddenly as he rode up to her, but the colour faded the next minute and left her very pale.

"You look as if you wanted sleep, more than an early ride,"

he said gravely, shocked at her waxen pallor, but still more at the startled look with which she had recognized him.

"I dare say I do," she answered carelessly. "We were dancing the cotillon at five o'clock. I had no idea you rode in the Park."

"I am only here because of my purchase yesterday. How do you like him?"

Helen looked critically at the handsome upstanding bay.

"Very much. He looks every inch a hunter."

"Isn't it a pity that I only want him for a hack?" said Adrian, with a touch of bitterness, remembering those days when his betrothed had lamented his deficiencies as a sportsman. "Never mind, Helen, you can hunt him in the autumn when you come to the Abbey. You will come, of course?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, but you must come, Helen. You must come and stay with my mother, and take your fill of rest, and dulness, and country air, after the whirl and wear of London life. There is nothing in the world so good as perfect rest in a quiet old country-house. Valentine will have the shooting in September and October, and you can have plenty of cub-hunting. I will get one of the Miss Treduceys to look after you. They never miss a morning."

And then, bending over her horse's neck, he said, with gentle earnestness:

"Remember, Helen, the Abbey is your natural home, and my mother your natural protector, second only to your husband. In the hour of doubt or trouble that home ought to be your haven of refuge. Never fear to go there for shelter: never fear to confide in my mother's love."

"You are very good. Lady Belfield is the dearest woman in the world. Of course I shall be charmed to go to the Abbey if Valentine will take me, and I dare say he will like to go there for the shooting," replied Helen hurriedly, with a troubled manner, Adrian thought; not as one whose mind was at ease.

"Your horse has more breed than mine," he said, by way of changing the conversation. "He is a very beautiful creature. Where did Valentine pick him up?"

"He was bought at Tattersall's. It was not Valentine who chose him. It was Mr. Beeching—or Lord St. Austell—I am not sure which of them really bought him. They are both considered good judges."

"No doubt. But Val paid for the horse, of course?"

"Of course," answered Helen, reddening at the question. "Who else should pay for him?"

"He must have given a high figure, I take it?"

"No; the horse was a bargain. When I begged him to buy

me a horse, Valentine said he would only give sixty guineas—that was all he could afford—and I believe Ravioli was bought for about that money."

"Then there is something wrong with him, I suppose. I hope he is not a dangerous horse."

"Dangerous? Not the least. He has perfect manners."

"And he is not a whistler or a roarer?"

"Certainly not."

"Then I congratulate you on having secured a wonderful bargain. Any one would give you credit for riding a three hundred guinea horse. I gave very nearly two hundred for this fellow, and he is not half so handsome as yours. Ah, here comes St. Austell. Was he in your cotillon last night?"

"Yes; he is devoted to the cotillon."

Lord St. Austell met them both with the easiest air. He, too, complained of sleeplessness. "These late parties are killing us," he said. "One loses the capacity for sleep. I shall have to go to a Hydropathic in the wilds of Scotland or Ireland for a month or two, just to pull myself together before I go to the East for the winter."

"I should hardly have given you credit for being out so early," said Adrian.

"Wouldn't you? Oh, I am better than my reputation, I assure you. I hate the Row when the mob are out, and the band, and the talk, and the nonsense. Good day." He saluted Helen, and cantered away, as if he had no other purpose in his ride than healthful exercise, and Adrian and his companion saw no more of him.

They rode up and down for an hour, Adrian trying the paces of his new horse, which behaved in the "new broom" manner of horses that have been nourished in a dealer's yard for a space, to the temporary subjugation of their original sin. After that quiet hour's ride and quiet talk, Adrian escorted his sister-in-law back to her door, where the man from the livery-yard was chewing his customary straw; and here they parted.

"My mother and I go back to Devonshire to-morrow morning, Helen. You'll not forget?"

"A thousand thanks, no. Good-bye."

And so they parted. She said not a word about going to see Lady Belfield that afternoon, and Adrian did not ask her. He heard afterwards that she and Mrs. Baddeley were at the Ranelagh, dined there, and drove home late in the evening to dress for a ball. The beautiful Mrs. Belfield was invited everywhere this season, and her fresh young beauty had opened many doors which had hitherto been closed against Mrs. Baddeley.

There was an awkward story about that lady's diamonds, the

particulars of which had been only correctly known to a select few, but which the select few had not forgotten, while even the vulgar herd knew there was a story of some kind, not altogether creditable to the wearer of the gems.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"IT CANNOT BE"

Lady Belfield went back to Devonshire dispirited at having seen very little of her younger son during her stay in London, and not altogether satisfied with the aspect of his domestic affairs. That marriage which was no union, that laborious pursuit of pleasure which husband and wife were carrying on in opposite directions, filled her with anxiety.

Those darker clouds which Adrian had perceived on the horizon had not revealed themselves to the matron's innocent eyes. Her experience of life had not familiarized her with the idea of false wives and deceived husbands. These two had married for love, casting all other considerations to the winds, and it never occurred to her that such lovers could weary of each other. She saw that they were leading frivolous lives, and living very much apart; she saw many tokens of folly and extravagance on both sides; and she left London full of vague fears for the future. But there was no forecast of sin or ignominy in her mind when she bade Helen good-bye in the little Japanese drawing-room just before she drove to Paddington.

It was within an hour of noon, and Helen came out of her bedroom, pale and wan, in her white muslin wrapper.

"You have had a very short night, I fear," said Lady Belfield.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind how short it was if I could only sleep," answered Helen impatiently. "My nights are always too long. The birds were singing when we came home, and I thought if I could only sleep for a couple of hours I should be as fresh as they were; but I lay awake till the birds changed to the milkman, and the milkman to the postman, and then came the tradesmen's carts."

"You must come to the Abbey, Helen; there will be silence and rest for you in your old rooms."

"Oh, I love those old rooms, though I have had some sad thoughts in them. Yes, Val says he will be delighted to go to you for the pheasant-shooting."

"But that is a long time for me to wait. I want you very soon, Helen. A quarter-past eleven. I must go, love. The express starts at a quarter to twelve. Good-bye."

And so they parted, with kisses, and not without tears on Helen's part.

The door had scarcely closed when she flung herself on the sofa and buried her face in the cushions to stifle her sobs. Valentine was sleeping soundly after a late night at his club.

Adrian met his mother at Paddington, and they went down to Devonshire together in the seclusion of a reserved coupé, with books and newspapers, fruit and flowers, and all the things that can make a long journey endurable on a sultry summer day.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Baddeley is not quite the best companion Helen could have, although she is her sister," said Lady Belfield, after a long reverie.

"I only hope she is not quite the worst," replied Adrian, laying down the new *Quarterly*. "I wonder that Valentine does not see the danger of such an association."

"Danger is an alarming word, Adrian."

"I can use no other. The beautiful Mrs. Belfield, the latest fashion in beauty, ought not to be met everywhere in London without her husband, and with such a woman as Mrs. Baddeley for her chaperon; a woman who prides herself in going everywhere with three or four men in her train."

"It is all very sad, Adrian."

It was all very sad; and it was sadder that Lady Belfield and her son could do nothing to stop this headlong progress of reckless husband and frivolous wife drifting towards ruin. Constance Belfield felt that it was worse than useless to dwell upon the subject in her conversation with her elder son. She wished, on his return home, that all things should be made bright and pleasant to him; and yet her own uneasy fears about that other son made happiness impossible.

She was surprised one morning, within a week of her return, at receiving a letter from Helen, hurriedly written, and with unmistakable signs of agitation.

"You told me there were silence and rest for me at the Abbey, and that you wanted me soon," Helen wrote. "May I go to you at once? I am tired to death of London and the season, and I think sleeplessness would kill me if I were to hold out much longer. Valentine has Goodwood and half-a-dozen other race meetings coming on, so he really does not want me here, since he can hardly ever be here himself. May I go to you to-morrow, dear mother? I shall not wait for a letter, but shall start by the 11.45 train, unless I receive a telegram to forbid me."

The telegram sent in response to this letter was one of loving

welcome. "Ask Valentine to come with you, if only for a few days," was the last sentence in the message.

Lady Belfield drove to the station to meet her daughter-in-law. She stood on the platform as the train came slowly in, and the first glimpse of Helen's face shocked her. That pale wan look which she had noticed on the morning after the ball had intensified to an almost ghastly pallor. Helen looked wretchedly ill, and there was an expression of misery in that pallid countenance which was more alarming than any physical decay.

Constance Belfield had too much tact to notice the change as she and Helen clasped hands on the platform, or during the drive to the Abbey.

"I am very glad to have you here, my dearest," she said, and that was all.

Helen was curiously silent, and offered no explanation of her sudden visit. She nestled affectionately against Lady Belfield's shoulder, resting her weary head there, smiling faintly, with a smile that was sadder than tears.

"I feel so much happier here than in London," she said. "I feel so *safe* with you, mother."

She had hitherto refrained shyly from that familiar name; but in her yesterday's letter and in her talk to-day the word "mother" seemed to come naturally from her yearning heart.

"Yes, dear, you are safe with Adrian and me. He has forgotten and forgiven the past, and you are to him as a very dear sister."

"That is so good of him. But how poorly he must think of me. Yes, I know he must despise me for my conduct in the past, and for the foolish, frivolous life I have been leading this last season."

"The season is over now, Helen, with all its frivolities. It is not even worth thinking about."

"Yes, it is all over now," sighed Helen. "I don't suppose I have been much worse than other people. I know I have not been half so bad as some women—and yet I hate myself for my folly."

"As long as it has left no sting behind it, dearest, the folly may so easily be forgotten."

"Oh, but there is always a sting, the sting of self-contempt."

"I will not hear you talk of self-contempt. You are coming to the Abbey to be happy, and to get back your roses. Adrian has a horse that he says will suit you admirably. You will enjoy riding on the moor in the early mornings."

"Adrian is too kind; but I don't care much for riding now."

"Don't you think some moorland rides would brace you up

after your long spell of late hours and hot rooms? At any rate, there will be cub-hunting for you in a month or six weeks, and *that* you are sure to enjoy."

Helen only answered with a sigh, which sounded like an expression of doubt, and was silent for the rest of the drive, as if too weary for speech.

Adrian was in the porch ready to receive his sister-in-law; and he too was startled at the change for the worse which the last week had made in Helen's appearance.

Helen's rooms were in the southern wing, immediately over the library. There was a large bed-room with a wide Tudor window, and an oriel at the south-western corner; and there was a spacious dressing-room adjoining, which served also as a boudoir, and was provided with all luxurious appliances for reading and writing, or repose. There was a secondary dressing-room on the other side of the bed-room, which Valentine had used on former visits, and where there were still some of his canes and riding-whips in the rack and some of his hunting gear in the drawers.

The casements were open, and the scent of tea roses and honeysuckle came in with the soft breath of summer winds. The view from that wide old window was of the loveliest, a wooded valley, through which the broad full river ran sparkling in the western sun, and beyond the vale the bold dark outline of the moor, like a wall that shut off the outer world.

Helen sat on the broad window-seat after Lady Belfield left her, looking out at the oaks and beeches, the thickets of hawthorn and holly, and the river flowing below them at the foot of the hill; looking and not seeing any of those things which showed themselves with such exceeding loveliness in the golden haze of afternoon. She was seeing another scene, far less fair, yet not unbeautiful. A lawn sloping to the Thames, with fine old trees here and there, and in the background a white lamp-lit house, with classic portico and long French windows. Across the river are other lamps, shining in many windows, and chimneys and dark roofs, and a black barge sailing by upon the moonlit stream; and on the rustic bench beside her, in the shadow of a veteran elm, sits a man whose voice thrills her like music, a man who pleads to her, who dwells with ever-increasing urgency upon his own misery if he is to be doomed to live apart from her, who implores her to pity and to bless his despairing love, to let him be the sharer of her life, the guardian of her happiness. He pleads as poor humanity might plead to the angels. He reveres, he honours her in tenderest phrases, in sweetly flattering speech, while he exercises every art he knows to bring her down to the level of the lost among her sex. He dazzles her with the glitter

of artful phrases, with the fancy picture of the future they two would live together, once having broken the bondage of conventionality. "Conventionality!" That is the word by which Lord St. Austell defines duty to her husband, respect for the world's laws, and fear of God. Conventionality alone is to be sacrificed.

So he pleads to her, half in moonlight, half in shadow, in that quiet corner of Hurlingham lawn, far away from the racket of the club-house and the terrace, where frivolity chatters and saunters in the moonshine.

Here there is no frivolity. Here is deepest purpose. He pleads, and she answers weakly, falteringly. No, a thousand times no—it cannot be.

She is utterly miserable, her heart is broken—but it cannot be. She returns again and again to the same point—it can never be. And he, as he hears her half-sobbing speech, as he sees her bent head and clasped hands, tells himself that it will be. The woman who can resist a tempter does not answer thus—does not listen as she has listened.

But for that night at least he can win no other answer than that despairing refusal. They part after the drive home, on her sister's threshold, where they have driven in a party of four, the inevitable Beeching in attendance upon his liege lady, albeit resentful of ill-treatment. They part in silence, but even the clasp of St. Austell's hand at parting is a prayer, scarcely less insistant than those spoken prayers in the Hurlingham garden.

This had all happened the night before last, and she has not seen him since, and she has sworn to herself that she will never see him again.

What shall she do with her life without him? That is the question which she asks herself despairingly now, in the golden light of afternoon, sitting, statue-like, with her hands clasped above her head, leaning against the deep embrasure of the massive old window. What is to become of her without love, or mirth, or hope, or expectancy? All things that gave colour to her life have vanished with that fatal lover, who came as suddenly into her existence as a rainbow comes into the sky, and glorified her life as the rainbow glorifies the horizon

CHAPTER XXV.

PAST CURE

Lady Belfield was content to cherish and make much of her daughter-in-law without asking any awkward questions. There was no letter of remonstrance from Valentine, therefore it might be supposed that he took no objection to his wife's absence; and so far all was well. Early hours, fresh air, pleasant society would no doubt soon exercise a good influence upon Helen's health and spirits. Brightness would return to the fair young face, and reviving health would bring a happier frame of mind.

Helen went to her room soon after ten o'clock every night, except when there were visitors; but she rarely came downstairs until after the family breakfast. This privilege was accorded to her indifferent health. She walked and drove with Lady Belfield, and took afternoon tea with Lady Belfield's friends. She did not care to ride or to play tennis, and those amusements were not pressed upon her either by Adrian or his mother. It might be that all she wanted was rest. Adrian watched her attentively, without seeming to watch. He knew now but too well how weak a reed this was upon which he had once hazarded the happiness of his own life.

Mr. Rockstone and the Freemantles were the most frequent visitors in the long summer days, dropping in at all hours, sitting about the lawn with Lady Belfield and her son, bringing all the news of the parish, and discussing the more stirring though less interesting news of the outer world.

Sometimes the Miss Treduceys came in, an hour before afternoon tea, just in time for a double sett at tennis, with Adrian and Lucy Freemantle, who was less sheep-faced and a good deal prettier at twenty than she was at eighteen.

She was a tall, fair girl, with light brown hair and clear blue eyes—eyes in which the very spirit of candid and innocent girlhood seemed to smile and sparkle. She was a happy-tempered, bright, industrious girl, helping her father and mother in all their hobbies and all their plans, and ruling her very inferior brother with affectionate tyranny. There could have been no more striking contrast than that between Lucy Freemantle, in the vigour and freshness of her girlhood, and Helen Belfield, in her broken health and spirits.

"What a very sad change in your pretty daughter-in-law," said Mrs. Freemantle to Lady Belfield. "She looks as if she were going into a decline."

"Oh, we won't allow her to do that. She is here to be cured," Constance replied cheerfully.

She did not want to have Helen pitied and despaired about by half the county.

"People told me she was quite the rage in London when I was there in June," said Matilda Treducey. "I met her at two or three parties, but she was always so surrounded that I couldn't get a word with her; and I hope, dear Lady Belfield, you won't feel offended if I own that I don't like Mrs. Baddeley, and that I rather avoided any encounter with *her*."

Lady Belfield was silent. She too had her doubts about Mrs. Baddeley, and was not inclined to take up the cudgels in that lady's behalf, albeit she inwardly resented Miss Treducey's impertinence.

The days went by peacefully and pleasantly enough, but there was no revival of Helen's spirits. Country air and country hours were doing her some good, perhaps. She was a little less wan and pale than she had been on her arrival; but Adrian's calm watchfulness perceived no improvement in her moral being. If she smiled, the smile was evidently an effort. When she talked there was the same air of constraint. If he came upon her suddenly in the drawing-room or the garden, it was generally to find her sitting in listless idleness, with the air of one for whom life had neither pleasures nor occupations.

This state of things went on for more than a month. It was the middle of August, and the weather was sultrier than it had been in July. Mrs. Baddeley was astonishing the quieter visitors at a Scarborough hotel, and delighting her train of attendants, who had rallied to that point from various shooting-boxes on the Yorkshire moors. Valentine was going to and fro over the earth like the Evil One, in his journeying from one race meeting to another. He occasionally favoured his wife with a few hurried lines from a provincial hotel, telling her his whereabouts.

He appeared thoroughly to approve of her residence at the Abbey, and promised to join her there before the first of October.

This, so far as it went, seemed well, or at least it so seemed to Lady Belfield. Adrian was not altogether satisfied.

"I don't like Valentine's passion for the turf," he said one day, when he and Helen were sitting on the lawn after luncheon, she making believe to work, he with a volume of Herbert Spencer on his knee, and his thoughts very far from the pages of that philosopher. "I hope, Helen, there is no truth in a rumour that I heard at my club when I was in London the other day."

"What rumour?"

"A man assured me that Valentine has a share in Lord St. Austell's racing stables."

She crimsoned at that sudden utterance of St. Austell's name, and could scarcely answer him.

"I—I—have never heard of such a thing," she said.

"But you know that St. Austell and your husband are close friends, although they only met a little while before your marriage, when St. Austell was at Morcomb. If there is any truth in the report, Valentine is in the right way to ignominious bankruptcy. He has only your settlement, and the allowance my mother makes him. Neither of those would be available for his creditors. Practically he is a man of straw, and has no right to speculate in a racing stud."

"I don't believe he does speculate. He likes to go to races, and he bets a little sometimes. He has given me money that he has won on the turf. I know that there is a stable belonging to—to—Mr. Beeching—and Lord St. Austell; but I don't think Valentine has anything to do with it, beyond going to look at the horses now and then."

"I hope you are right, Helen. The turf is a dangerous distraction for any man; it would be deadly for my brother. I hope he will have had enough of race meetings by the end of this year, and that he will sober down to a more domestic life. That pretty Japanese drawing-room of yours ought not to be always empty."

Helen did not reply. Her head bent lower over the group of poppies in crewel-stitch which she carried about with her in a basket all day long, and which seemed to make no more progress than Penelope's web.

Two or three days after this little conversation, Sir Adrian was surprised by a subtle change in his sister-in-law's spirits.

It was not that she seemed happier than before; but she was certainly less listless, less despondent. She had an air of suppressed excitement, which showed itself in a forced gaiety. She talked a great deal more, laughed at the smallest jokes, and she suddenly took it into her head to play tennis violently with Jack Freemantle. To Adrian it seemed as if she was impelled by some hidden agitation which found relief in movement and occupation of any kind.

Looking back at the events of the previous day, he remembered that she had been wandering about the park alone in the afternoon for two or three hours. She had, for the first time, avoided driving out with Lady Belfield, on the ground that the afternoon was oppressively warm; and then soon after luncheon she had taken a book and strolled out into the garden. He had missed her later on, and had met her three hours afterwards returning from the Italian terrace by the river, that

cypress walk where he had received the proof of her inconstancy.

He felt that there was an evil influence at work, and he feared that the evil influence was St. Austell.

He had seen enough while he was in London to inspire him with grave doubts as to the relations between his brother's wife and that nobleman. St. Austell's position and St. Austell's reputation were alike dangerous, and that light nature of Helen's was not formed for resistance in the hour of temptation. Adrian remembered the scene on Lady Glandore's terrace and the morning ride in the Park; and his heart was ill at ease for the woman who was to have been his wife.

CHAPTER XXVI.

OPENING HIS EYES

While Helen was pacing the cypress walk in the long August afternoon, Valentine was at York, where the summer meeting was in full swing. Interest as well as pleasure had led him to the northern city. He was not, as his brother had been told, a partner in the St. Austell and Beeching stable, but his interests were deeply involved in their successes, and he had mixed himself up in their turf speculations in a manner which might result in a great *coup* or a great disaster. One of their horses was entered for the Great Ebor, and stood pretty high in the betting; another ran in a smaller race; and there were three of the stud entered for selling stakes.

Valentine had backed Postcard rather heavily for the Great Ebor, and he knew that Beeching and St. Austell had both laid their money pretty freely, and that both believed in the horse. To Beeching losing or winning was a matter of slight consequence; but, like most millionaires, he was very intent upon making his stable pay, and was very savage when the luck went against him. St. Austell was by no means rich, and to him Postcard's success must be a matter of importance. The value of the horse would be quadrupled if he won this great race, to say nothing of his owner's bets.

Under these circumstances, Mr. Belfield was surprised at not finding St. Austell at King's Cross when he arrived on the platform, just in time for the special. It had been arranged the week before that he, Beeching, and St. Austell were to travel

together by this train, which left London at eight in the morning on the first day of the races, and were to occupy a suite of rooms together at the hotel till the meeting was over. Mr. Beeching had charged himself—or had been charged—with the duty of engaging the rooms, and of securing a coupé for the journey.

Mr. Beeching was on the platform, with his valet in attendance upon him. The coupé was engaged, and a picnic basket, containing a Strasbourg pie, a chicken, and a couple of bottles of extra dry champagne, was in the rack. But there was no St. Austell.

"What does that fellow mean by being behind time?" asked Valentine, when he and Beeching had taken their seats, and the doors were being shut.

"St. Austell? He is not coming."

"Not coming! Not coming to see Postcard win the Great Ebor?"

"No. He's chucked up the stable," answered Beeching coolly. "You see he owed me a hatful of money one way and another, and the other night he and I had a general square-up, which resulted in my taking about seven shillings in the pound all round. He surrendered his interest in Postcard and the rest of the stud, and I gave him back his I O U's. He is going to India next week."

"Why India?"

"Lungs. Can't stand a European winter. His doctors advise him to try Ceylon or India. He is keen upon an Oriental tour, and he's off to Venice next week on his way eastward. He'll potter about in Northern Italy, perhaps, for a month or so, and then put himself on board a P. & O."

"Queer," said Valentine. "He never told me anything was wrong with his lungs, though he looks a poor creature at the best of times."

"We can't all be gladiators like you. I don't think St. Austell knew there was anything radically wrong till he went to Sir William Jenner a little while ago, and had himself overhauled. But he has been laid up more or less every winter for the last three or four years, and he has lived pretty fast, as you know. I should think India would be a capital move for him."

"Perhaps," assented Valentine, pondering deeply, with bent brows.

On the Knavesmire, all their acquaintances were surprised at St. Austell's absence, and Mr. Beeching had to give the same explanation to a good many people. Valentine was irritated by this iteration.

"Deuce take the fellow! What a lot of trouble he has given us!" he said angrily. "He ought to have come to see the

horse's performance although he had parted with his interest in him. He has got a good deal of money on the race, anyhow."

The great day and the great race came. The Knavesmire was a scene of life and movement, of vivid colour and ceaseless animation—a scene of universal gladness, one would suppose, taking the picture as a whole. But in detail there was a good deal of disappointment. It is only the disinterested lookers-on, the frivolous people who go to race meetings to eat and drink and stare about them in the sunshine, the clodhoppers and bumpkins who loll upon the rails and gaze at the scene as at the figures in a kaleidoscope—it is only for these that there is no bitter in the cup of pleasure, no fly in the ointment.

Postcard, after a magnificent lead, which elated all his backers, shut up—in Mr. Belfield's parlance—like a telescope. He was a powerful horse, and would have pulled splendidly through heavy ground ; but the weather had been peerless, and the course was as hard as macadam, so the lighter horses had the advantage. Beeching and Belfield ate their lunch in moody silence, and drank twice as deeply as they would have done to signalize a triumph.

"I'll be hanged if I spend another night in this cursed hole," said Valentine, when the day's racing was over.

"Oh, you'd better see it out. I've got the rooms for the week, don't you know? and I shall have to pay pretty stiffly for them, and I've ordered dinner. You may just as well stay."

"Make it Yorkshire, if you're afraid of the expense, and when you come back to town I'll square up," retorted Valentine sulkily. "I'm tired of the whole business. Your stable has never brought me luck. Good-night!"

It was only half-past five; the sun was high still, but sloping westward, and carriages and foot people were moving out of the green valley in masses of shifting lights and colours. A pretty scene ; but far from pleasant to the jaundiced eye of Valentine Belfield.

He got into a cab, drove to the hotel, bundled his things into a bag and a portmanteau, and had them carried to the adjacent station just in time for one of the special trains which were taking the racing men back to London. He got into a saloon carriage, coiled himself up in a corner away from the dust and the glare, and presently, when the express was flying across the country, past those broad fields where the corn was still standing, low hills where lights and shadows came and went in the softening atmosphere of evening, he fell fast asleep, and slept for nearly three hours, sleeping off that extra bottle of champagne which he had drunk almost unawares in his exasperation.

It was dark when he awoke, black night outside the carriage

windows—and within there was only the dim light of the lamp, almost obscured by tobacco smoke.

There were very few passengers in the spacious carriage, and of those few, three were asleep, sprawling in unrestrained repose upon the morocco cushions, worn out with open air, sun, dust, and drink. Two men sat in the angle of the carriage, in a line with Mr. Belfield's corner, and those two were talking confidentially as they lazily consumed their cigarettes, talking in those undertones which are sometimes more distinctly audible than the brawl and rattle of loud voices.

"I tell you, my dear fellow, everybody knew all about it except the gentleman most concerned," said one; "and whether he didn't know, or whether he was wilfully blind, is an open question. I don't like the man, and I should be willing to think anything bad of him, but he's a good bred 'un, anyhow, and I suppose we ought to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"He was never about with her," returned the other man; "she went everywhere with her sister, and we all know the sister."

"A very charming woman," said his friend, with a laugh, "and a very dangerous one. She's about the cleverest woman out, I think; for, without compromising herself seriously, she has contrived to make more out of her admirers than any woman in London. She must have bled Beeching to a pretty considerable tune, I fancy."

"Oh, Beeching is fair game," said the other man. "Nobody minds Beeching. That kind of pigeon was only fledged in order to be plucked; besides, Beeching is uncommonly careful. Nobody will ever do him any harm. He has the commercial intellect fully developed. You may depend he keeps a close account of his *menus plaisirs*, his grass-widows and such like, and knows to a shilling what they cost him, and will never exceed the limits of strict prudence."

Mr. Belfield's attention was fully awakened by this time. He had turned himself round in his shadowy corner, and was listening with all his might. He knew one of the men, a member of the Badminton and the Argus, slightly; the other not at all.

"The worst story against her is the story of the diamonds," said the man whom he did not know.

"Ah, you were in India when it happened, and knew all about it, I suppose," replied the other. "It was a rather ugly story, I believe, but I never heard the details."

"I was in Baddeley's regiment when she came to India with him," said the other. "She had not been married six months, and was about the loveliest woman I ever saw in my life. As handsome as Mrs. Belfield is now—that splendid Irish beauty,

which is unsurpassable while it lasts, great grey eyes with black lashes, a complexion of lilies and carnations, form and colour alike lovely and luxuriant, a woman who makes every cad in the streets stop all agape to look at her. She startled us at our hill station, I can tell you, and the Baddeley madness raged there all that season like hydrophobia. One of our men, a poor little lieutenant, a mere lad, Lord Brompton's son, took the disease very badly. What was sport for us was death for him. He fell madly in love with his Major's wife, and hung about her and followed her about in a distracted way that would have been laughable had it not verged upon the tragic."

"Did she encourage him?"

"Of course she did. He was a swell, and ridiculously generous. She nicknamed him Baby, talked of him as 'a nice boy,' and before long he was known everywhere as Mrs. Baddeley's Baby. He didn't seem to mind people laughing at him. We went to Calcutta later on, and there were balls and all sorts of high jinks going on, and Mrs. Baddeley was the belle of the place, and everybody, from the Governor-General downwards, was avowedly in love with her. Poor young Stroud hung on to her, and was savage with every man she noticed. One night, at the Governor-General's ball, she came out in a blaze of diamonds. One of us chaffed the Major about his wife's magnificence; but he took it as easily as possible. She had hired the gems from Facet, the great Calcutta jeweller, he told us. 'I suppose I shall have to pay pretty stiffly for the use of them,' he said, 'but if she likes to cut a dash in borrowed plumes, I can't complain. It'll be a deuced long time, I'm afraid, before she'll be able to show a diamond necklace of her own.'"

The speaker stopped to light a fresh cigarette, and then went on lazily dropping out his sentences between puffs of tobacco.

"Baddeley is a big, good-natured, self-indulgent ass, but I don't know that he's anything worse than that. We all laughed at his story of the hired diamonds, and six months afterwards, when young Stroud broke for six-and-twenty thousand, most of it money borrowed from Calcutta Jews, we all knew that Mrs. Baddeley's diamonds counted for something, and Mrs. Baddeley's little caprices for something more, in the lad's entanglements. We were all very sorry for him. Brompton was said to be a martinet, and the young man went about Calcutta looking as white as a ghost for a week or two, while he was trying to make terms with his creditors. Then one morning in barracks there was a great scare. Young Stroud had shot himself half-an-hour after morning parade. He had left two letters on his table, one addressed to his father, the other to Mrs. Baddeley."

"How did the lady take it?"

"I suppose she was rather sorry. She never showed herself

in Calcutta after the catastrophe. The regimental doctor went to see her every day, and the Major told every one that she was laid up with low fever, and that the climate was killing her. She went back to England a month or so after Stroud's death, and she carried the spoils of war with her, and has worn them ever since."

'And you think the younger sister is as bad?" said the other man thoughtfully.

There was no malevolence in either of them. They were only discussing one of the problems of modern society.

"I don't know about that. I believe she has more heart than Mrs. Baddeley; and that she is over head and ears in love with St. Austell. They have been carrying on all the season, and I wonder they haven't bolted before now."

"My dear fellow, nobody bolts now-a-days. Elopements are out of fashion. There is nothing further from the thoughts of a modern seducer than a *ménage*. The days of post-chaises and Italian villas are over. We love and we ride away. St. Austell is a man of the world and a man of the time. Here we are, old chap. My trap is to meet us here."

They took up their sticks, hats, and overcoats, and left the carriage before Valentine Belfield's brain had recovered from the shock of a sudden revelation.

He started to his feet as they went out, called out to the man he knew, followed to the door just as the porter slammed it and the train moved on. He hardly knew what he meant to do: whether he would have called the slanderer to account, caned him, challenged him. He stood by the door as the train rushed on, rocking him as it went—stood there dazed, bewildered, recalling that idle talk he had overheard from the darkness of his corner yonder, wondering how much truth there was in it all.

About Mrs. Baddeley, his wife's sister? Well, there might be some ground for scandal there perhaps. He had long known that she was a coquette, and a clever coquette, who knew how to lead her admirers on, and how to keep them off. He knew that Beeching had ministered freely to the lady's caprices; and he had always looked upon St. Austell as the lady's favoured admirer, and the man for whom she was in some danger of compromising herself.

The story of young Stroud's futile passion for his Major's wife, and of costly jewellery given at a time when Lord Brompton's heir was already deeply in debt, was not altogether new to him. He had heard some vague hints in the past; but men had been shy of alluding to that old scandal in his presence.

He had known that his sister-in-law had been talked about; but no man had ever dared to insinuate that she was anything

worse than a clever woman, perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

"I back Mrs. Baddeley and her poodle against Lucretia and her dagger," he had heard a stranger say one night in the club smoking-room; and it had seemed to his somewhat cynical temper that his wife could not be safer than with a thoroughly worldly woman, a woman who knew every knot and ravelled end in the "seamy side" of society.

But St. Austell his wife's admirer! They two head over ears in love with each other! Never for one instant had such a possibility dawned upon him; and yet those two men had talked as if that mutual passion were an established fact, known to all the world, except to him, the deluded husband.

Helen, his Helen! The wife who had satiated him with sweetness, whose devotion had cloyed, whose fondness had been almost a burden. That she should play him false, that she should care for any other man on earth! No, he could not believe it. Because two idiots in a railway carriage chose to tell lies, was he to think that the woman who had counted the world well lost for love of him had turned traitress and was carrying on with another man?

St. Austell, a notorious rake! a man who had the reputation of being fatal in his influence over women.

The man had seemed safe enough so long as he had thought of him only as Mrs. Baddeley's lover; but with his suspicions newly aroused, Valentine Belfield looked back at the history of the last few months, and saw all things in a new light. He remembered how in Mrs. Baddeley's festivities at Hurlingham, Ranelagh, or Sandown, water picnics at Henley or Marlow, Sunday dinners at Richmond or at Greenwich, St. Austell had always been one of the party. Beeching and St. Austell had always been at hand. Whoever else was included, those two were inevitable. He had reckoned them both as Leonora's devotees; they were the pair which she drove in her car of triumph, like Venus's doves or Juno's peacocks. One possessed her heart, and ruled her life; the other was her purse-bearer. Knowing all this, or believing this, he had yet been content that his wife should go everywhere under her sister's wing. The arrangement relieved him of all trouble, and Helen seemed happy. People complimented him upon his wife's beauty, and he accepted their praises as a kind of tribute to himself; pleased to show the world how careless he could afford to be about a wife whom everybody adored, secure in his unbounded dominion over her, free to neglect her and yet to defy all rivalry.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNFINISHED LETTER

Mr. Belfield sat brooding during the rest of the journey to King's Cross, and his thoughts grew darker with the darkening night. Yes, St. Austell had haunted his wife's footsteps all through the season that was past. He had heard of them riding in the Row; it was St. Austell who had chosen Helen's horse at Tattersall's, and who had been officiously obliging in attending the sale and getting the animal for a price that seemed almost ridiculously at variance with its quality.

He could recall the whole transaction: how in St. Austell's presence one evening, after a little dinner in Mrs. Baddeley's rooms, Helen had entreated him to buy her a horse, urging that it was odious to ride hired animals, smelling of the livery stables and suggestive of a riding-master in butcher boots; how he had declared he couldn't afford to buy; and how St. Austell had told him that it would be a more economical arrangement than hiring, and had suggested that a good horse might be got for a very little money now that the hunting was all over.

"What do you call a little money?" Valentine asked, annoyed at his wife's persistence, and at St. Austell's interference.

"Well, I suppose you might pick up a good Park hack for ninety or a hundred."

"Nearly twice as much as I should like to give," answered Valentine curtly.

"How much would you give if there were an opportunity? I am at Tattersall's nearly every day, and I would be on the look-out if I knew what you wanted."

"I don't want anything. There are plenty of horses in Devonshire that my wife and I can ride when we're there."

"But Devonshire isn't the Park, Val," pleaded Helen. "I want a horse for the Park, awfully." Whereupon Mr. Belfield shrugged his shoulders, and said he would give fifty or sixty guineas for a hack, rather than be bothered; and with this ungracious permission his wife was fain to be content.

Three days after this conversation, Valentine found Lord St. Austell's groom waiting in front of Wilkie Mansions with a thoroughbred bay horse, which he was gently leading up and down the road.

"His lordship's compliments, and this is the horse he has bought for you, sir," said the man. "Ravioli, grandson to Macaroni."

Valentine looked the animal over critically.

"Is he sound?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. His lordship's vet looked at him before the sale."

"Well, he is very handsome; and, if his manners are as good as his looks, his lordship has made a capital purchase."

Valentine met St. Austell at his club next day, and gave him a cheque for fifty-seven guineas, at which sum the horse had been knocked down to him at Tattersall's. At such a price, the animal, if sound, was an unquestionable bargain. Valentine had ridden him round the Row, and had found his paces admirable, although he was obviously over-weighted by anything above eleven stone. For a light weight like Helen the horse was perfection.

"The yard must have been asleep when you bought him," said Valentine.

"Oh, I knew how to bide my time and watch my opportunity," answered St. Austell lightly. "I am very glad you're satisfied with my choice."

"More than satisfied, my dear fellow."

So the matter had ended. Mr. Belfield, full of his own schemes, pleasures, and excitements, had thought no more of the horse, except to remember that he had made a sacrifice to his wife in buying him, and that she ought to be very grateful.

To-night, looking back at the past in the new light of awakened doubts, he shrewdly suspected that St. Austell had fooled him, and that, under the pretence of getting a bargain at Tattersall's, he had presented the woman he admired with a horse that had cost three times as much as her husband was willing to pay. And she had known the secret of the transaction, no doubt, and they had laughed together at the husband's meanness, and at the ease with which he had been hoodwinked. Valentine Belfield almost choked with rage at the idea of his own blindness.

"To think that I should be deceived by any woman—above all by my wife—the wife I won as easily as a pair of gloves—and by Heaven, I thought she was as much my own as my gloves or my hat—as faithful to me as my favourite dog."

Yet remembering how easily she had been won, how soon she had wavered in her fidelity to Adrian, he could scarcely wonder that she had faltered in her truth to him. St. Austell was fascinating, a man of eminently seductive manners, deeply read in that modern literature which women appreciate, distinctly a man to please women—while he, Valentine, was a sportsman, caring little for women's society, and making no sacrifices to please them, looking upon them as a lower order of beings whose nature it was to be suppliants and adorers of the master spirit, man. He had never thought of his wife's love for him as a measurable quantity, which he might exhaust.

"She has been a fool, and she has been a coquette," he said to himself, as the train steamed past the shabby streets and gaslit windows of northern London; "but I don't believe she has been anything worse. It will be my business to drive her with a tighter rein in future. You have been allowed to go too free, my sweet. It must be curb instead of snaffle, henceforward."

He had business in London which must needs be done before he could look after his wife. Postcard's defeat meant losses which amounted almost to financial ruin. Money would have to be raised, and at a sacrifice. He could not bring himself to appeal to his mother for help in a turf difficulty: first, because she had been very generous to him already; and secondly, because there were other difficulties, other debts imminent, for which he would be obliged to ask her assistance.

Under these circumstances he went to a Jew money-lender, and involved himself deeply in order to raise money against settling day. From the money-lender's office he went to Tattersall's, where he was almost as well known as Lord St. Austell. He saw one of the chief clerks, a man with whom he had been on familiar terms ever since he had been a frequenter of the famous auction-yard.

"There was a horse sold here last May," he said, "a thoroughbred bay, grandson of Macaroni. I want very much to know at what figure that horse was knocked down. I've got a bet upon it."

"What's your bet, Mr. Belfield, if it's not an impertinent question?" asked the man easily.

"If it was I wouldn't mind it from you, Jones," answered Valentine. "I've laid two to one that Ravioli fetched over two hundred."

"I think you're pretty safe, sir. I remember the horse. He was one of Captain Poppingay's lot, and they were all good 'uns. I'll turn up the catalogue in a minute. May 7th, 10th, 14th: yes; here they are—hunters, Park-hacks, team of coach-horses."

He ran his finger down the pages of a catalogue, his practised eye following the figures with amazing rapidity. The prices realized by the horses were written in the margin beside the lot numbers, and the names of the purchasers on the other side of the page.

"Ravioli, five years old, thoroughbred, has been hunted with the Pytchley, carries a lady," he read. "Your money's safe, Mr. Belfield. Two hundred and seventy-eight guineas. Lord St. Austell bought him."

"That's your ticket," answered Valentine lightly. "I thought I was pretty safe. Good-night; a thousand thanks."

He had just time to catch an afternoon train for the West of England, a train which left Waterloo late in the afternoon, and which was due at Chadford Road Station a little before midnight. It was a slow train, and one by which he would only have travelled in an emergency.

He had telegraphed no announcement of his coming, either to his mother or his wife. It was a part of his plan to take Helen by surprise, and he was willing to hazard the difficulty of getting into a house in which all the servants might have gone to bed before he could arrive. The chances were that Adrian would be in the library, where it was his usual habit to sit reading long after midnight.

Chadford Road Station was nearly five miles from the Abbey, and Mr. Belfield was in no humour for a long walk. The Station Hotel, a decent inn, which could provide a one-horse fly upon occasions, and which called itself a posting-house, was open, so he went in, ordered a brandy-and-soda, and a trap to take him to the Abbey.

The ostler and the flyman were lazy and slow, and Mr. Belfield had to wait a quarter of an hour while the fly was being got ready. He stood in the bar, drinking his brandy-and-soda, and talking to the landlady, a large and blooming matron, of the Devonshire-dumpling order of beauty, whom he had known from his childhood.

"I never thought to have the pleasure of waiting upon you to-night, Mr. Belfield," she said. "But I always stop up for this train and send the girls to bed. And yet I'm generally the first up of a morning. I've been expecting you down at the Abbey, too, for I saw Mrs. Belfield driving with her ladyship the other day, as pretty as ever, but looking rather pale and out of sorts, I thought."

"Yes, she is not over well. She is down here for her health."

"To be sure, sir. The London season does take a deal out of a lady," replied the innkeeper's wife, shaking her head, and with an air of knowing town dissipations by heart. "There's been one of your friends stopping at Chadford for the last few days, Mr. Belfield; but he hasn't brought any horses this time, and not even so much as a body servant. He came into the place as quiet as any commercial."

"Indeed! Who is that?"

"Lord St. Austell. My good man saw him yesterday evening sauntering by the river, just outside the Lamb gardens, and he heard afterwards that his lordship had been stopping at the Lamb for the last three days, which, considering that there's no sport except salmon fishing at this time of year, and that the cooking at the Lamb is about as bad as it can be, puzzled me

and my husband as to what attraction a gentleman like Lord St. Austell could find here."

"Oh, there is always sport for a true sportsman," answered Valentine lightly.

"Well, as you say, sir, it may be the salmon, and that would account for his not bringing any horses."

"Ah, there's the fly; good-night, Mrs. Crump," and Valentine jumped into the lumbering old landau, and was jolted along the road to Chadford.

He looked up at the Lamb as he passed. Yes, there were lights in the windows of the sitting-room facing the bridge, the room that St. Austell and Beeching had occupied three years ago. His wife's lover was there. Her lover! He had no doubt as to their guilty love now. That revelation about the horse was damning proof of St. Austell's perfidy, even if it left Helen's conduct still doubtful. To Valentine, it seemed that they were leagued against him, and that they had laughed at his blindness—at him, the man who prided himself upon his knowledge of horse-flesh, and who had been duped so easily. Nor was this all. He looked back and remembered many incidents, looks, words, arrivals and departures, meetings that had seemed accidental, circumstances of all kinds, trifling enough in themselves, yet signs and tokens of secret guilt. He had been so certain of his wife's allegiance, so secure, as to have been the last to observe these indications, which had been obvious to all the rest of the world.

"If I had known that all women are——. But no, there is one good woman in the world, my mother; and I have grown up in the belief that all well-bred women must be like her. I thought that it was in the nature of a well-born girl to be chaste and true. I ought to have known differently. God knows I have heard stories enough—but I thought there was a line of demarcation, a gulf between the sheep and the goats."

He ground his teeth in an agony of rage, not more infuriated at the idea of his wife's falsehood than at the thought of his own blind confidence. The hard-worked old horse was rattling along the road at a good pace, eager to get his business done and go back to his stable; but to Valentine's impatience it seemed as if he were crawling. At last the fly stopped short, and the driver got down to open the gates leading into the avenue.

The gates were rarely locked at night. The lodge windows were dark. Before they were half-way down the avenue, Valentine called to the man to stop, and got out while he was pulling up his horse.

"I'll walk the rest of the way," he said, giving the man a shilling out of the loose silver in his pocket. "Good-night."

"Good-night, sir, and thank 'ee," and the horse-of-all-work

turned and cantered gaily homeward, while the driver thought what a pleasant man Mr. Belfield was, and what a cheery voice and manner he had.

Mr. Belfield was hurrying down the avenue at almost a run. He wanted to be face to face with his false wife—to surprise her by the suddenness of his coming, to stand before her without a moment's warning, strong in his knowledge of her guilt. That was the one passionate craving of his mind, the one hope for which he existed at this moment. After *that* there would be another meeting—between him and St. Austell; a meeting which must end in blood. Yes, straight before him in the near distance he saw inevitable bloodshed. No modern vengeance, beaten out inch by inch, thin as gold leaf under the goldbeater's hammer; no thirty days' scandal in the law courts, with all its pettiness of foul details and lying and counter-lying of hirelings; not for *him* the modern husband's mode of retribution; but swift, sharp vengeance, such as one reads of in old Italian chronicles. Vengeance as speedy and sudden, if not as secret, as those dealings between man and man which made the glory of Venice in the good old days of the Council of Ten, when every seducer went with his life in his hand, and knew not whether the sun that rose upon his guilty pleasures might not set upon his untimely grave in the Canal yonder, and when every false wife had a daily expectation of poison in the domestic wine-cup or a dagger under the matrimonial pillow.

Valentine Belfield had no uncertainty of mind as to his manner of dealing with St. Austell. They two would have to stand face to face upon some quiet spot in France or Belgium, where a brace of pistols would settle all scores. How he was to deal with his wife was a more complex question; but for the moment his desire was only to confront her, and to wring the confession of her guilt from those false lips.

The house was dark for the most part, as he had expected to find it; but there were lights in the library windows, and in the windows of his wife's rooms above the library. She was not at rest then, late as it was. Her guilty conscience would not let her rest, perhaps.

He knocked at the glass door in the lobby next the library, a door which stood open all day in fine weather, and by which his brother went in and out of the garden twenty times a day, loving the old-world garden almost as he loved his books. He heard the library door open, and Adrian's footsteps approaching; and then the shutter was taken down and the door opened cautiously a little way.

"Who is there?"

"Valentine."

"Valentine!" cried Adrian, throwing open the door, and

holding out both his hands to his brother, "Why didn't you telegraph? Helen went to bed nearly three hours ago."

"Her candles are still burning, anyhow," answered Valentine gloomily. "I take it I shall find her awake, late as it is. Good-night. We'll reserve all talk till the morning."

"Won't you come into the library for ten minutes. All the servants are in bed, no doubt, but I might get you something, perhaps—wine, or brandy-and-soda."

"Not a thing. Good-night."

His manner mystified Adrian, and impressed him with a foreboding of trouble. Never had he seen so dreadful an expression in his brother's face—the contracted brows, the rigid, bloodless lips, the fixed look of the haggard eyes, staring straight forward, as if intent upon some hideous vision.

Adrian watched him as he went up the little private staircase which led only to that one suite of rooms in the library wing; watched, and felt inclined to follow him, and yet held back, not liking to pry into his brother's secrets. What could that trouble be which had wrought such an evil influence upon Valentine? Money troubles, perhaps—turf losses. Adrian had heard enough while he was in London to know that his brother was the associate of racing men; and it was easy enough to guess that he had involved himself in turf transactions.

Yet there was that in his face which indicated stronger passions than money troubles should cause in any reasonable being. But then, Valentine was apt to give way to unreasonable wrath against anything that came between him and his wishes.

"It is nothing of any moment, perhaps," thought Adrian. "He will be in a better temper to-morrow morning."

He told himself this; yet so intense was his sympathy with his brother, that he went back to the library troubled at heart. He tried to go on with the book he had been reading when Valentine knocked at the door; but his thoughts were with his brother and his brother's wife in the rooms above him. He found himself listening for their footsteps, for the sound of their voices, which reached him now and then, faintly audible in the stillness of the night.

The casement was open in the mullioned window yonder, and there may have been an open window in the room above.

Valentine opened the door of his wife's bed-room suddenly, and stood on the threshold looking at her.

She was writing at a table in the middle of the room, in a loose white dressing-gown, her hair falling upon her shoulders. The room was in supreme disorder—drawers pulled out to their fullest extent, wardrobe doors open, a litter of discarded odds and ends upon the floor, and trunks packed as if for a journey.

She heard the door open, looked up, and saw her husband standing in the doorway, with that blanched and angry countenance which had so impressed Adrian. She started to her feet, staring at him with dilating eyes, and with her hands stretched out tremulously above the paper on which she had been writing.

"Yes, it is I, your husband," he said. "You expected some one else perhaps. You thought it was your lover."

His quick eye caught the action of her hands, the fingers spread wide as if to conceal the writing on the table, while she stood motionless, paralysed with fear. He was at her side before she had recovered from the shock of his appearance, and had snatched that half-written letter from the table.

The ink was wet in the last lines, and there was a long tremulous stroke where her hand had faltered as she looked up and saw him in the doorway.

"Don't read it; don't read it, for God's sake, Valentine," she cried piteously.

"Not read a letter which is addressed to myself," he said. "You are a very curious woman, Mrs. Belfield, and that is a very curious request. Stay where you are," he cried, seizing her wrist fiercely, as she made a terror-stricken movement towards the door; "when I have read your letter I shall know how to answer it."

He held her there pinioned while he read the following lines:—

"As you have long ceased to care for me, Valentine, it can hardly be any great loss to you to lose me for ever. You have lived your own life, and have left me to live mine. You have done nothing to make my life happy, or to prove your regard for me. For a long time I went on loving you, patiently, devotedly, blind to your selfishness and neglect, waiting and hoping for a day that never came. But at last my eyes were opened, and I began to understand your character and my own folly in caring for you. And then another love was offered me, generous, devoted, self-sacrificing, and for the first time I knew what the passion of a lifetime means. When you read these lines I shall be far away from this house—far away from England, I hope—with the man who loves me well enough to sacrifice his social position for my sake, and for whose love I am willing to forfeit my good name. I have but one regret in taking this step, dreadful as its consequences may be; and that is my sorrow in proving myself unworthy of your mother's affection. To forfeit her esteem is very bitter. From you I have nothing to lose, for you have given me nothing——"

He stood with this letter in his right hand, and his left holding her wrist—stood looking in her face, after he had read the

last word, she looking back at him, terror changed to defiance. She had been shocked and startled at his sudden entrance, but it was not in her nature to turn craven.

"Do you mean this?" he asked.

"Every word of it—yes, every word. You have neglected me, trampled upon me—treated me as if you had bought me in a market for your slave. Yes, while all the best men in London were treating me like a queen, while I had followers and flatterers enough to turn any woman's head, you did not see that there was danger—you did not care. But there was one who cared—one whom I love as I never loved you."

"And you loved me as you never loved my brother, and you will change again, and tire of St. Austell as you tired first of Adrian and then of me. You are a wanton by nature; but you have reckoned without your host, you fair false devil. You shall not live to dishonour me."

He had his Malacca cane in his hand, a cane with a loaded handle. Did he forget that the gold knob was weighted with lead, as he raised the cane and struck her, in blind, ungovernable rage—struck the fair, pale brow with all the force of a practised athlete?

She reeled under the blow, and then fell backwards with a dull thud, fell without a cry, and lay on the Persian carpet, looking up at him with wide open eyes, and a red gash upon her forehead.

It was done. He stood looking down at her an instant, and then his brain reeled, and he staggered back against a sofa, and sank upon it, half-unconscious, with a noise like the surging of the sea in his ears, and a great light in his eyes. Then came darkness, through which he heard hurrying footsteps and an opening door, and then nothing.

He re-opened his eyes after what seemed a long interval, and saw Adrian kneeling beside that prostrate figure, holding a hand-mirror above the white lips.

"Adrian!" he faltered hoarsely, as his brother rose slowly to his feet and faced him.

They stood looking at each other, both faces rigid with horror; so like, and yet unlike, even when the same overmastering emotion possessed each in the same degree. They might have been the principle of good and of evil encountering each other, love and hate, right and wrong, compassion and cruelty—any two qualities of human nature that are most antagonistic.

"You have killed her," said Adrian, almost in a whisper.

"Are you sure?" gasped the other. "Is there no hope? Is she really dead?"

"Yes. Not a breath upon the glass," laying down the mirror as he spoke. "Not the faintest throb of the heart. Look at those glassy eyes—Murderer!"

"It was not murder! I struck her down in my fury—struck at her as at an infamous woman who had betrayed me—who defied me in her shamelessness. Yes, she defied me, Adrian; blazoned her guilt; told me she loved him as she had never loved me. I surprised her as she was writing that letter"—pointing to the open letter on the table—"coolly announcing her intention to dishonour me.

"She stood there, looking at me, repeating this; and I had that devilish cane in my hand, and I lifted it and struck her—struck at her blindly, as I would have struck at a strong man. I struck her on the forehead, and she fell. I knew no more, till I looked up out of thick darkness and saw her lying there, and you beside her."

"Well, you have killed her. That is how neglect and cruelty have ended," said Adrian. "If she sinned against you—if she would have left you for another man—it is you must bear the burden of her sin. You are the greater sinner. But now you have to consider how you are to answer for what you have done. The straightest course will be the best. I will go and awaken Mrs. Marrable, and then send for the doctor. He can do nothing; but it is our duty to have him here as soon as possible."

Valentine flung himself between his brother and the door.

"Wake old Marrable! Send for the doctor!" he echoed. "Are you mad, Adrian? Do you want to put a rope round my neck?"

"I want to save your neck, and your conscience, too, as far as I can," answered Adrian, with the calmness of an intellectual nature which rises with the importance of a crisis. "You must face the situation honestly, awful as it is. There is no other way. There must be an inquest, and you will have to answer for what you have done. You will be sure of sympathy in your character of an outraged husband, when that letter has been read. There will be a verdict of manslaughter, perhaps—impossible, I fear, to avoid that; and you may have to go to prison for a short time."

"Was there ever such a fool?" cried Valentine. "Do you think I am going to offer my neck to the noose like that? 'I am very sorry, gentlemen of the jury, that I have had the misfortune to kill my wife. I hope you will be civil enough to call the matter manslaughter, and to let me off easily; but if you choose to call it murder, here I am, ready for the hangman.' No, my good brother; we must manage things better than that. We won't call up old Marrable, or send for the family doctor.

We have the best part of the night before us yet. We must dispose of——that!"

He pointed with quivering finger to the pallid form lying on the carpet. It was a small Persian carpet of delicate colouring on a white ground, and the blood from that deep cut upon the temple had made a crimson patch on the whiteness. How harshly that crude red showed against the half tints of the Oriental pattern!

"I will have nothing to do with you unless you take the straight course," said Adrian.

"Oh yes, you will. You are my brother, the other half of myself, bound to me by the most mysterious tie that humanity knows. You must help me. You must go with me, hand and foot, heart and brain! What, would you have my mother wake to-morrow to be told that her son had given himself up to answer for the murder of his wife? Do you think such a blow as that would not kill her, as surely as that fatal blow killed yonder wanton," pointing scornfully to his victim.

"Valentine, are you a man or a devil?"

"There is a touch of the latter in my nature, perhaps. When you were made all of milk and honey, I took the gall and wormwood for my share. I say you must help me, and without the loss of a minute; or if you won't help me you may look on. At least I suppose you will hold your tongue."

"I tell you again, Valentine, your only safety is in facing your danger, and answering for what you have done."

"And I tell you again that I am not such a fool as to take a fool's advice."

He knelt beside his dead wife, and rolled the carpet round those lifeless limbs. Calmly, with a diabolical decision and promptness, he arranged his ghastly burden.

"Open the door," he said, "and bring a candle." Adrian obeyed, instinctively, mechanically. His conscience and his intellect alike revolted against his brother's actions, yet he submitted and went with him. Perhaps he may have argued that when a man's life is at stake he has the right to follow his own judgment rather than any other man's counsel. The awfulness of the stake may give exceptional rights.

For the trained athlete, that slender form was no oppressive weight. Valentine carried his burden with the head lying across his shoulder, the long loose hair falling like a veil over those marble features, the waxen hand and arm hanging on his breast. His own face was of almost as deathlike a hue as that pallid arm. His brows were bent, his lips sternly set, his eyes dark with desperate resolves. He would put that ghastly evidence of his crime away anywhere, anyhow, to save himself, his own full-blooded fiercely throbbing life, this vigorous all-

enjoying entity which death would reduce to nothingness and everlasting oblivion. Brave as a Roman to endure pain, to face danger, to live down disgrace, Valentine turned craven at the thought of life's inexorable end. He would ward off that to the uttermost hour. He would fight for that as the fox fights, with dauntless courage and inexhaustible cunning.

What was this burden that he carried, cold and still, upon his passionately-throbbing heart? What was this that he should think of it, or care for it, or be sorry for its sake? A weak, false woman, slain upon the threshold of her sin—caught like a bird in the net, just at the moment when she was going to inflict upon him the deepest wrong that woman can do to man.

No. He gave not one thought to his victim. He carried her as the butcher carries the lamb to the slaughter-house. Slowly, deliberately, with steady footsteps in the corridor and on the stairs, he carried his burden through the silent house, motioning to Adrian to precede him with the candle, to open doors for him, to withdraw bolts—and so the brothers went in silence out into the silent night.

There were stars shining above the wooded hills—the night was not all silence. They could hear the ripple of the river in the valley; a tender lullaby, music for lovers and happy people. The summer wind came over the moor like a Titan's sigh, soft and slow, and full of melancholy.

Adrian left the candle burning on a table in the hall, and followed his brother across the threshold. He closed the door behind him, lest the creaking of the hinges should awaken any member of the household. The door would open easily from the outside; there would be no difficulty in returning to their rooms by-and-by, when that ghastly load had been put away.

He found himself considering all the consequences, calmly and deliberately, as if it were no new experience for him to be concerned in the concealment of a murder. Involuntarily he recalled the history of famous murders, which his imagination had dwelt upon, fascinated by their morbid interest.

He remembered Thurtell's crime, and the body hidden in the pond in the garden, and then taken out of that pond and carried off to a safer hiding place. He remembered that still more ghastly murder done by the two Mannings, husband and wife; the grave dug beforehand for the victim; the snare of sensual pleasures; the bushel of lime.

And now his brother, the other half of his own being, the creature he had loved and clung to and admired for the strength of his manhood, and envied for Nature's bounteous gifts—this being so near to himself had sunk to the level of those heroes of the Newgate Calendar, and had to bend his mind, as they had bent theirs, to the concealment of an irreparable crime.

They had walked a long way in silence, half way down the avenue and then across the grass to a lower level, descending that wooded gorge through which the river ran, darkened with the shadow of the foliage. They had reached the path beside the stream without a word spoken by either. But here Adrian broke that gloomy silence.

"For God's sake, Valentine, consider what you are doing, and the consequences that may come of it. Do you know that you are branding yourself for ever with the crime of murder? There can be no question of manslaughter—justifiable homicide—after this."

"If you will hold your tongue, there will be no question of anything—in relation to my wife—except that she ran away from me. There will be her own handwriting to show how she eloped with her lover. Yes, that will be there to answer for her, in black and white, in her own hand, when she lies rotting among the water-rats."

"Valentine, be brave, be honest! Go back. Take her back. Tell the world what you have done. It will be better, wiser, safer!"

"It would be the act of an idiot. Go and scrape the rust off some of that old armour in the hall, Adrian; and mount Cinderella, and go clattering along the high roads in quest of adventures. You are of the temper that makes lunatics of Don Quixote's breed. I am not."

For not one instant had he slackened his pace or faltered in his purpose, as he argued with his brother. He knew every yard of water in that swift deep stream, bearing down with ceaseless impetus from the quiet hills yonder, from solitudes that seemed like holy places in the stillness of night. He knew every bend and every pool. His experience as an angler had made him familiar with all.

There was one deep pool where he had had many a tussle with a gigantic pike, a shining scaly monster, that sulked among the rushes and set him at defiance. He had landed such a one many a time in that shadowy corner, where the water-weeds grew thick and tall.

It was there she should lie.

That should be her grave, deep and secret, deep in the slimy bottom of the river, entangled among snaky roots, wedged in with pebbles—hidden for ever from the light and the world.

He laid his burden upon the grassy slope beside the pool, and then began to collect a score or two of pebbles, the largest he could find along the path, taking them at longish intervals, lest some prying eye should observe that the stones had been removed from the coarse gravel.

Then, when he had got together as many as he wanted, he

tied them in his handkerchief and fastened them to the dead girl's girdle. Then he wrapped the carpet more securely round her, tied it with the large silk kerchief from his neck, and, so secured, he dragged the corpse to the brink of the water and gently pushed it into that shadowy depth. It sank like a plummet. The water rippled and bubbled about it for a minute or so, and there was a noise of rushing creatures or a rustle of reeds and water-weeds, and then all was silent.

Adrian stood with his back against a willow trunk, watching his brother's movements with wide-open awe-stricken eyes, the incarnation of speechless horror.

When the water had ceased to ripple round the spot where that ghastly load had gone down, Valentine turned his back upon the rushy bank, and walked quickly up and down the path, looking right and left, peering into the shadowy recesses between the great brown branches of oak and elm, the faintly shining silver of the beech trees, looking lest by some diabolical chance they should have been followed and watched. He waited here and there for a minute or so, listening intently, as he had listened many a time for the hounds, in the woodland or on the moor; but he could hear neither breath nor motion of any living creature, nothing but the whisper of the wind among the leaves.

Suddenly came a far-off sound, gradually louder, steady, persistent, inevitable. It was the sound of an express train travelling along the line that ran at the bottom of the valley, on the other side of the stream, and on a level with the water.

"The mail from Exeter," said Valentine. "Half-past one."

They walked back by the way they had come in silence, till they came to a point, midway between the river and the Abbey, where the path divided, one way leading to the park gates, the other to the house. Here Valentine stopped abruptly.

"Good-night and good-bye," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. You needn't be afraid. If there should be awkward questions asked, or suspicions aroused, I will come back to answer them. I won't leave you in the lurch."

"I am not afraid of that; but you had better come back to the house with me. It will be no worse for you to bear than for me."

"That's your idea," answered Valentine shortly, as he vanished in the darkness of the shrubbery.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LEAVES FROM LORD ST. AUSTELL'S JOURNAL

JULY 19TH.—Had a row with Beeching, who declared that I had undermined his influence with Leo, whom he adores, and that I have spoiled his chances without caring a rush for the lady myself. There was a time when I cared a good many rushes for the lovely Leo, and would have gone a very long way for her sake; but a lovelier than Leo appeared—a fairer star rose above my horizon; and *Adieu paniers, vendanges sont faites.*

I did not tell Beeching this, but rather enjoyed his jealousy, and let him fume as he liked. After he had stormed like a Stock Exchange Othello, he began to talk about money matters, and to "throw out," as my valet calls it, about my obligations to him in regard to the stable. He had found most of the cash, and I had swaggered and made money at his expense. This was intolerable, so I told him that I was heartily sick of the stud, and still more so of him. "There's not a thoroughbred one among the whole lot," said I. He flared up at this, and we became exceedingly bitter.

The matter ended in a way that was eminently agreeable to me. We agreed to part company as joint-proprietors of a racing stud, including Postcard; and I surrendered all interest in that distinguished animal and his stable companions for a consideration—said consideration being total release from all liabilities on behalf of the stud. A very good bargain for me. The gentle savage was in a rage. His hereditary instincts, as the son and grandson of stockjobbers, should have warned him against transacting business while he was in a passion.

"Blessed are those whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled," &c. My blood and judgment *are;* for I have never yet allowed temper to make me blind to my own interest. I really made an excellent bargain with Beeching.

I hate quarrels, and it is always painful to me to cut a man with whom I have been very familiar, so when I met poor old Joe at Hurlingham on the following day—Saturday, and a capital Saturday—I clapped him on the shoulder, and suggested that we ought to be the best possible friends now that our business relations were at an end.

I told him that I was out of health, lungs altogether unsatisfactory, and that my doctor warned me against wintering in Europe. The Riviera might do for most people, but it was

not good enough for me. I must go to Algiers, Egypt, or Ceylon.

This, by-the-way, is unvarnished truth. I seldom get through a winter in England without a bad attack, and I have been strongly advised to try the East.

Egypt I have done, to its last cataract and its last mummy. I have seen the first rays of the morning sun shining upon Memnon's head, and have learned and forgotten a monstrous number of lies about Cleopatra. Algiers I know as well as South Kensington. Ceylon remains—the land of spices and tea. To Ceylon I will go if——

If she will go with me.

Will she? That is the question.

I think she will. She has owned that she loves me; and when a woman once makes that confession all the rest is a question of patience and time. She is too feminine a creature to be false to the destiny of womanly loveliness, which is to reward a devoted lover. She is more to me than ever woman was before her—more to me, dearer to me—utterly beautiful, and utterly beloved. I would make any sacrifice to win her, would accept lifelong exile, and, what is much worse, lifelong poverty for her sake. My affairs are in low water, and she has not a sixpence; but I think I have enough to rub along upon in Ceylon, where life is easier and Society less exacting than in England. Stables and baccarat have absorbed more than two-thirds of my income; and away from the turf and the clubs I shall be comparatively rich. With her for my companion, I shall be infinitely happy.

July 22nd.—She has bolted. When I called at Wilkie Mansions this afternoon the door was opened by a maid without a cap, who smelt of rank tobacco—Life Guardsman in the dining-room, I dare say—and who told me her mistress had gone to Devonshire. She left by the 11.45 from Paddington on a visit to Lady Belfield.

"Will she be away long?"

The maid had no idea; no date had been mentioned for her mistress's return. Mrs. Baddeley was out. No information on the other side of the staircase. My Helen has run away from her Paris instead of running away with him. We sat for two hours together at Hurlingham last night, and she gave me no hint of this departure. She was very melancholy. I saw tears in her eyes more than once, and thought them a good sign. They were a bad sign, it seems; for to-day she bolts.

Does she think Devonshire and the ægis of a mother-in-law can protect her from the pursuit of a lover? No more than the temple and the shrine could save Cassandra from Ajax. I shall not follow her immediately. I have a good many engagements and some business transactions to detain me in town. I will

give her time enough to be miserable without me, to discover the emptiness of life without love, to pine and mope in rustic monotony. My chances will be ever so much better for a judicious delay.

August 17th.—Here I am, without a servant, keeping dark at the inn where Beeching and I put up nearly three years ago. I thought of bringing my man, as he is a shrewd fellow, and would be useful to me in the event of success—looking after a carriage to take us to the station, getting off luggage, and so on—if I could rely upon his discretion. But one can never rely upon that class of man. The sharper he is the more certain to talk. A well-trained fool would be an invaluable servant, if one could have such a combination. Your smart fellow inevitably gives away his master. So I decided on coming alone, and here I am, ostensibly intent on salmon fishing in the Chad. I went so far as to bring some of my old Norwegian tackle, which is now adorning my sitting-room. This is a deadly dull neighbourhood out of the hunting season, and the hours I cannot pass with *her* will be ghastly. To approach her will be difficult, as I don't want her mother-in-law to know I am here. They drove past the inn this afternoon in a big barouche, she looking the image of sadness.

She is martyrising herself—and for what? Is it conscience, duty, honour, chastity, fear of the world's opinion, or doubt of me that weighs heaviest with her?

Her heart is mine; and she must know that she would be happier as my mistress than as the wife of a clown, who leaves her in a state of semi-desertion, and has so little knowledge of her value that he exposes her to the pursuit of every profligate in London. With me she would be safe, guarded by an infinite love, sheltered from every harm.

August 19th.—I have seen her. We met this afternoon in a lonely path beside the river. I had been paddling easily for an hour, when I saw her white gown gleaming between the tall dark trees, and in five minutes I had moored my boat to a great weeping willow, and I was by her side.

We were together for two hours, walking up and down by the river, or sitting on a bench under the willow. Not a creature passed that way to my knowledge, except some men in a boat who had been netting salmon further down the stream. For two hours we had the world, and the sunlight, and the summer air all to ourselves; and during all that time I was pleading my cause, and she listening and agreeing and disagreeing, and contradicting herself, divinely inconsistent and illogical, after the manner of her sex.

But I know that she is won all the same.

She went so far as to talk of our life in Ceylon, even the kind

of clothes she would have to wear there. There is no situation in life, be it ever so solemn, in which a woman does not think of her clothes. "I do not believe I have a gown fit for the place," she said. How like a woman!

"Bring three or four white muslin dressing-gowns," I said, "and leave all your smart frocks behind. You shall have a toilet of banyan leaves and orchids. You shall have cobweb muslins and silks, that you can pull through a wedding-ring, and Indian embroideries dazzling with jewels. You shall have a gown of peacock's feathers over a cloth-of-gold petticoat!"

"Would not that be too warm for the tropics?" she said, smiling at me through her tears. She is alternate sun and shower, like an April day. "But you know I am only joking; you know I am not going with you."

"I know that you are going with me, that you could not be so cruel as to break my heart. You know that for me the East means life, but that life without you would be death. So if you refuse to go, I shall stay in England, and let the winter do its worst for me."

"You will stay and die?" she said, with a scared look.

That little chronic cough of mine has always an effect upon women, and it attacked me just at this moment. I shouldn't be surprised if I really am consumptive. I know I detest winter and bad weather.

After this, we shed a few sympathetic tears, her head upon my shoulder, under the willow. The westering sun steeped us in golden light; the air breathed rustic perfume, mingled odours of pine woods and wild flowers; the ripple of the river was like music. If life could have gone on for ever thus—flowing on, like the river, in sinless ecstasy—I should have been content. Heaven knows I am not a profligate. I have never loved a woman who was not a lady. Love without sentiment or poetry has always been hateful to me. It is the union of soul with soul that I have sought; and in Helen I have found my ideal.

I told her my plan. She is to receive a telegram to-morrow morning between seven and eight, ostensibly from her husband, summoning her to London. She is to leave hurriedly by an early train, carrying her luggage with her.

She listened and promised to obey, and I believe she will keep her word. I have been down the line to Barnstaple, and have telegraphed to my servant in London, instructing him how to telegraph to Mrs. Belfield, and in Mr. Belfield's name, from South Kensington. She will be able to show her mother-in-law the message, and, short of Lady Belfield offering to go to London with her, I see no chance of failure.

She will get away quietly by the 10.40 train, and I shall start

by an earlier one, so as to escape notice, and to be ready to meet her at Exeter. Thence we shall go on together to London, dine in a private room at the Grand, and leave Charing Cross by the Continental mail. There will be no time lost, and very little fear of pursuit, for I know that Belfield was at York the day before yesterday, and is likely to be there till the end of this week.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AFTERWARDS

It was summer still, yet Adrian shivered as he sat and watched the slow dawn, the dawn that was rising with such an air of gladness for eager hunting men round about Chadford, starting up from their pillows briskly, with thoughts of trying new horses and young hounds across the dewy moorland or the heavy grass. Adrian felt as if his limbs were lead, and his forehead iron. He sat by the empty hearth in the library, with his book lying open on the carpet just where he had flung it last night in his agony of fear. He sat while the sun rose gloriously, shining with parti-coloured light through the emblazoned windows, steeping the sombre old room in splendour. He heard the cocks crowing triumphantly in the poultry-yard, the horses neighing as they were brought out of their stables for early exercise. The world was awake again, earth and sky were bright and blithe; and she was lying face downward in that dreadful pool where the great ravenous pike mustered. She was lying there, murdered on the threshold of sin, unshriven and impenitent, the victim of a miserable marriage.

He thought of her lying there—pictured her under the water-weeds, the lovely hair, dark with threads of gold in it, surging loosely to and fro with the slow movement of the tide. He thought of water-rats and all the foul creatures that haunt the margin of a river; but worst of all was the thought of those shining monsters which he had so often watched, flashing silvery under the dull green water.

And then he remembered her as he had first beheld her in her girlish beauty, light-minded and gay, gentle, pliable, a creature to entwine herself about a man's heart, to grow dearer to him by every folly, and more sacred to him by every weakness.

So would she have been to him had she become his wife. It would have been the delight of his days to cherish and protect

her, to strengthen that which was feeble in her character, to develop all that was good. Oh, if he could have recalled the past, and that fatal evening by the river, when he surrendered her to his brother. It was a base act so lightly to have renounced her, he thought, to-night, in his anguish. He ought to have saved her from herself. He ought to have claimed and held her against the world, anything rather than to have given her over to a scoundrel.

"My brother," he said to himself. "My own flesh and blood, so near and dear to me that I could not think him wholly bad, though I knew that he was selfish and self-willed. But I ought to have held her to her promise—she was mine, my very own, to protect and foster; and I let her go to another. I should have understood better what was best for her happiness. I should have known that she was not to be trusted with her own guidance."

His mind, completely unhinged by the horror of the night, wandered from the dreadful circumstances which he had to consider, dallied with the memory of the past—lost itself in futilities. What he had to think of was his brother, and his brother's position.

A murderer! He, Valentine Belfield, the beloved son of that tender-hearted mother—he was guilty of murder. He had committed that tremendous crime which stands alone among all other wrong-doing, and by which in one moment of madness a man may forfeit his life to the law. He may forge, steal, swindle, break hearts, betray friends, beggar the widow and the orphan, work ruin on the widest scale, and he may still possess that dastard life which to him means the universe. But for the shedder of blood the law has no mercy; for him Society has nothing but abhorrence.

Adrian looked up at those old armorial bearings, through which the sun was shining. How proud he had been of those historical quarterings—every one of which had its meaning. Had crime ever stained yonder shields before last night? Those oldest arms, yonder, had been borne by his Norman ancestor, the Chevalier de Belchamp, crusader and hero. The family had divided afterwards into Beauchamps and Belfields. Yonder was the shield of the Champernonnes, with whom the Belfields had intermarried; and there, on a scutcheon of pretence, appeared the badge of the Prideaux-Brunes, marking a marriage with an heiress of that family.

Had any son of those good old families ever stained his crest with the red brand of murder? Those men of the older time had lived in a violent age—when the sword was ready to the hand, and anger, hate, revenge, jealousy, were wont to recognize no higher law than impulse. Yes; doubtless there had been

crimes committed, blood shed by men who bore those honoured names; and the Church had heard the murderer's confession, and had absolved the sinner. Had not the Church thriven and grown rich by stories of crime? The very stones of old abbeys and minsters might show dark stains of blood, could they but tell of the motives which prompted the benefactions of their founders—of the craven spirits whose gold had been poured out like water to win forgetfulness on earth and pardon beyond the grave.

But murder to-day—in this civilized, well-regulated world, bears a more hideous aspect. Murder to-day means the newspapers and the hangman; and perhaps the newspapers are the more appalling ordeal.

"What will he do?" thought Adrian. "Kill himself!"

There was a new horror. To Adrian it seemed only a natural consequence of last night's work that Valentine should put a pistol to his mouth and blow out his brains. It seemed the only obvious issue. He knew that religious scruples would not stop his brother's hand. After what he had done, his life must needs be hateful to him, and the most natural thing for him to do was to destroy that life.

It was of his mother he had thought much more than he had thought of Valentine, during those long hours in which he had been sitting there, waiting helplessly for the morning; having no plan or thought as to what he should do, no capacity to think out the future, for himself or for his guilty brother. It was of her agony—her ruined life, her broken heart—that he thought; and he would have given his own life gladly to save her.

Would it be better for her peace of mind if her son were to destroy himself, and thus end the horror of last night by a double tragedy?

However terrible the catastrophe, it might offer the only possible escape from a deeper horror—the agony of seeing her son in a criminal dock.

What was to be done with him if he lived, if he clung to the burden of existence with all its possibilities of infamy? He had chosen the secret path, which to Adrian's mind stamped him for ever as a deliberate assassin, he who had sinned almost unawares in a moment of passion, and who might have confessed his crime and held himself erect before his fellow-men, guilty, but not dishonoured. He had chosen the darker path; the way of lies and concealments. He had made his choice, and would have to abide by it. That murdered corpse lying in the quiet grave yonder might rise up to bear witness against him, as other hidden forms had arisen out of unlikely places, to testify against other murderers.

After sunrise it seemed to Adrian as if the moments hurried

past with inexorable speed. He so intensely dreaded the awakening of the household, the resumption of the ordinary course of events, and then the inevitable shock of Helen's disappearance, the fear, the wonder, the confusion, his mother's distress and perplexity. It was of her he thought always; to save her pain he would do anything, sacrifice even conscience and honour. He, who was the soul of truth, would stoop to lie, and would lend himself to the concealment of his brother's crime.

The first sound of a housemaid's footfall on the stairs fell heavy on his heart. Then came the opening of a shutter on the ground floor. The day had begun. The hour chimed from the stable clock—six! All the house would be astir before half-past.

Adrian went slowly up to his room to steady his nerves by a cold bath, and to prepare himself to meet his mother. He shuddered as he caught sight of his haggard face in the glass.

"It is I who look like a murderer," he said to himself.

He remembered having passed a footman on the stairs, and how curiously the man had looked at him. He had been scarcely conscious of the fact at the moment, but he recalled it now at sight of his own face. No wonder the man had stared at him.

He made his toilet slowly, deeply thoughtful, and with a strange incertitude as to the duration of time—thinking he had spent hours in his dressing-room when he had been there less than an hour.

His valet knocked at the door presently.

"Your shaving water, Sir Adrian. Is there anything wrong, sir?"

How the question startled him. Was every interrogatory, every sound of a human voice to have the same power to scare him henceforward, until the dreaded discovery was made, and all was over.

"Anything wrong," he answered quietly, opening his door as he spoke. "No. What should be wrong?"

"Nothing, sir. I beg your pardon, sir; only when I went into your room just now I saw your bed had not been slept in, and it startled me a bit, sir."

"Oh, was that all? Yes, I dare say you were surprised. I was reading very late in the library last night, and I fell asleep over my book. And after I had slept in my chair till daylight, I did not feel inclined for bed."

The man assisted his master with the final details of his toilet, brushed invisible specks of dust off the neat grey lounge coat, handed Sir Adrian his watch and handkerchief, and glanced at him furtively now and then.

Nine o'clock. The prayer bell rang, and Sir Adrian went down to the breakfast-room, where the servants were quietly

slipping into their accustomed places in front of the sideboard. It was Lady Belfield's habit to read prayers at this hour, no matter who among her visitors came or stayed away. She exacted no subjection from her guests in this matter; but she deemed it her duty to her servants that she should be one with them in their devotions.

The prayers were not too long, nor the portion of Scripture too abstruse; and when they had all risen from their knees, Lady Belfield would inquire after the health of any one among them who was ailing, or would ask the last news of a sick parent, or would detain Mrs. Marrable for a few minutes' chat between prayers and breakfast, or take her into the garden to look at some small improvement, or at a newly marked geranium, which the gardener had evolved from his inner consciousness, as it were, by scientific treatment of the parent plant.

The bond of love and duty was very strong between mistress and servants at Belfield Abbey.

Helen had rarely appeared before noon during this last visit. Lady Belfield made no remark, therefore, when prayers were finished and when breakfast began without her daughter-in-law.

"You are looking very pale this morning, Adrian," she said, as she began to pour out the tea, with her son sitting opposite her in the morning light; "I hope there is nothing wrong."

Nothing wrong! It was just what his valet had said outside his door an hour ago.

"Nothing. Only I sat up later than usual last night—absorbed in a curious book. In fact, I was so foolish as to read on till I exhausted myself and fell asleep in my chair."

"That does not seem as if the book were very interesting."

"Oh, but it was interesting—a most engrossing book."

"What was it about, Adrian? I am always glad to hear of your new books."

"This wasn't new," he said hastily, fearing further interrogation. "It is a book of Müller's, and I was interested in tracing some of Darwin's ideas to their source in the earlier thinker."

"And you fell asleep in the library, and you were very late going to bed, I suppose," interrogated the mother anxiously.

"Very late. In point of fact, I—— What is it, Andrew?"

"Can I speak with you, if you please, Sir Adrian?" said the footman, with a look that foreboded evil.

Adrian arose hastily, and went towards the door.

"Yes, of course."

"Stop, Andrew," exclaimed Lady Belfield. "What can you have to say to your master that you can't say before me? Has anything happened?"

The man looked from his master to his mistress, and back again to his master, with a troubled aspect.

"It is about Mrs. Belfield, my lady. Mrs. Marrable felt a little uneasy at what Jane told her just now."

"What do you mean by all this mystery? Jane told her—what? Is my daughter ill?" asked Lady Belfield, hurrying to the door.

"No, my lady—it's not that, my lady; only Mrs. Belfield is missing, and her bed has not been slept in, and her boxes are packed and strapped, my lady, as if she had prepared to go away, and Jane, whose room is on the floor above Mrs. Belfield's rooms, not exactly overhead, but very near, heard her moving about very late last night, and wondered she should be up so late."

"What can it mean, Adrian?" exclaimed Lady Belfield. "She had no idea of leaving us for months to come. Why should she have packed her trunks? Where can she be? In the grounds, perhaps, wandering about somewhere after having been up all night. Let us go and look for her, Adrian. There is nothing really amiss, perhaps;" and then, in a lower tone she added: "Servants are such alarmists."

"A telegram, my lady," said the butler, appearing with the well-known orange envelope on a salver.

"For Mrs. Belfield," said his mistress, looking at the address. "Shall I open it, Adrian?"

"Yes, I think you had better," answered Adrian, trying to school himself to the falsehood which must needs govern his conduct henceforward, in all things bearing upon the horrors of last night.

The message was from Valentine Belfield to Mrs. Belfield, handed in at Kensington at thirty-five minutes past seven, received at Chadford at three minutes before eight.

"You are urgently wanted at home for reasons to be explained when we meet. Start by first train possible from Chadford Road."

"He must be ill," exclaimed Lady Belfield. "He would hardly summon her for any other reason. What could she be wanted at home for except her husband's illness—an accident, perhaps—thrown from his horse, or something dreadful. And he telegraphs cautiously, to prevent our being frightened. I shall go at once, Adrian. I won't wait till this silly girl is found. I'll go to my son as fast as the rail can carry me."

She rang the bell hastily, white with a new terror.

"Dear mother, don't agitate yourself so dreadfully—indeed there may be no cause for fear—about Valentine's health. I can't understand the telegram."

He stood with the message in his hand, perplexed beyond

measure. How should Valentine have been able to telegraph from Kensington at half-past seven that morning? He could not possibly have reached London by that hour, even if he were travelling in that direction. There had been no train that could convey him. Or even had it been possible, why should he have sent such a message? What end could he hope to gain by the hideous mockery of telegraphing to the dead? There was some mystery underlying the message.

"Tell Sanderson to pack my dressing-bag and portmanteau for the 10.40 train!" said Lady Belfield, when Andrew appeared, "and order the carriage at once. Adrian, I must leave you to look after Helen. There can be nothing really wrong with her—some foolish freak—an early ramble—and she has lost herself on the moor, perhaps. I cannot stop to think about her. She can follow me by a later train."

The mother's heart and mind were full of her son, and of him alone. She thought of him stricken by sudden illness—a consuming fever—congestion of the lungs—paralysis—or a fatal accident, his back broken, life ebbing fast away, life measured by moments; and she so far from him, with so many weary miles between them, seeming slow even when travelled by the fastest express that ever rushed along the iron road.

"Dear mother, you must do whatever you think best," said Adrian quietly; "but I am assured you are torturing yourself without reason. Why should this telegram mean illness? There are a hundred possibilities. It tells us nothing except that Valentine wants his wife at home. It may have been sent in a fit of temper."

The door opened, and Mrs. Marrable came in, clean and fat and homely, in her fresh pink and white print gown and lace cap, but much paler and less self-possessed than was her wont. Her broad, good-natured countenance had a distressed look as she approached her mistress with an open letter in her hand.

"If you please, my lady, *this* was found in Mrs. Belfield's room just now, lying on the floor, my lady, among bits of lace and scraps of paper, and such like; and I thought it was my duty to bring it to you with my own hands."

It was Helen's letter—that unfinished letter which so broadly confessed her wicked purpose.

"When you read this I shall be far away from this house—far away from England, I hope—with the man who loves me well enough to sacrifice social position for my sake, and for whose love I am willing to forfeit my good name."

Lady Belfield sank into her chair, crushed by this unexpected stroke. Her son's wife—the girl she had loved and trusted, and treated in all things as a daughter—this girl-wife, so young

and fair and seemingly innocent, had declared her guilt in those shameless lines. The mystery of Helen Belfield's disappearance was solved. She and her good name were gone for ever.

"What news for me to take to my son," she exclaimed, thinking more of him than of his guilty wife.

"Take my advice, mother. Do not go to him. There is something wrong about that telegram. It is a hoax, perhaps."

"No, no, Adrian. Who should invent such a hoax—to what end? I must go, I tell you—there is no alternative. He telegraphs for his wife. He has no longer a wife; but his mother can go to him in his trouble. That tie is not so easily broken."

"Let me go with you, then."

"No. You will have plenty to do here. You must find out all about that miserable girl: how and when she went, and with whom. Have you any idea? Do you suspect any one?"

Adrian was silent. How could he answer? how malign the dead? She had been on the brink of sin, and yet perhaps had died spotless, save in the intention to abandon her husband. And had Valentine been a different man—able to confront a crisis in both their lives, and to bring an erring wife back to duty—she might have repented on the very threshold of that awful guilt. The intention announced in that letter might never have been carried out. She might have lived a pure wife to the end. And was he to betray her now in her unconsecrated grave, and say, "Yes, I know all about her. Lord St. Austell was her lover."

"You don't know?" questioned his mother. "You have no suspicion about anybody, among her admirers. My God, this is what comes of being talked about as the beautiful Mrs. Belfield! You must telegraph to her father, Adrian: not to Mrs. Baddeley. I shall see her. And you will find out all you can about her flight. Poor, wretched, sinful creature! I was so fond of her," with streaming eyes.

Sanderson came in with her mistress's bonnet and mantle; travelling bag and portmanteau were in the carriage already.

"Am I to go with you, my lady?" asked the maid.

"Yes, mother, pray don't go alone," urged Adrian.

"Can you be ready this instant?"

"I've only to put on my bonnet, my lady. We shall have plenty of time."

It was within a few minutes of ten, and the train was to leave Chadford Road Station at 10.40. Lady Belfield put on her mantle; Sanderson ran off to get herself ready for the journey. Adrian handed his mother into the carriage, and stayed beside her, comforting and cheering her, till her maid reappeared, and all was ready for departure.

"Where will you stay, mother? At the Alexandra, I suppose. And if—if you find Valentine is not ill, that the telegram means nothing, you will come back to-morrow, will you not? Or you will telegraph to me to go to you?"

"Yes; I'll telegraph when I know what is wrong. I shall stay at Wilkie Mansions, perhaps. God grant I may find Helen there!" added Lady Belfield, in a lower voice. "She may have wavered at the last moment, and gone to her husband. That wretched letter may mean less than we think. It is not even finished, you see, Adrian. She may have written it in some sudden fit of resentment. Valentine has sadly neglected her. God only knows. Good-bye."

Mother and son clasped hands, and Adrian gave the coachman the signal for departure. He stood watching the carriage drive away, motionless, as if turned to stone, paralysed by despair. Under no other circumstances would he have allowed his mother to go to London upon such an errand alone. Under no other circumstances would he have failed to see her off at the station. But to-day he dared not do even as much as that. He dared not leave the house, that dear home of his childhood and youth, which to him was henceforward only the scene of murder, a place of hideous memories.

He went back to the breakfast-room slowly, wondering what next he was to hear. Mrs. Marrable was pretending to arrange the roses and golden lilies in the great chrysanthemum bowl which filled the breakfast-table with bloom and perfume.

"I do declare my lady has gone away without so much as a cup of tea!" she said. "It's a sad, sad day for us all, Sir Adrian."

"It is indeed a sad day, Mrs. Marrable."

"And to think that sweet young lady—oh, sir, I know it was very wrong!—but human nature is human nature, and we were all so upset in my room, and Jane she came rushing in with that letter, half out of her wits, poor girl; and oh, Sir Adrian, she'd read the letter on the stairs, not knowing what she was doing, and she just gave it into my hand, tried to speak, and couldn't; caught her breath, and went off into strong hysterics, and I make no doubt she's in them at this very moment."

"Then you all know——" He was going to say "everything," but stopped himself, and said: "You all know that my sister-in-law began to write a very foolish letter which she never finished, and which may mean nothing. She has some reason to complain of my brother's neglect, and she may have written that letter as a kind of warning to him."

"Yes, Sir Adrian, she may. Only—only—" faltered Mrs. Marrable, who loved "the family" with a reverential affection, and would have cut her tongue out rather than speak dis-

respectfully of any one bearing the name of Belfield—"only, what can have become of Mrs. Belfield if she has—not—gone away with some one?"

That question seemed unanswerable, for Sir Adrian remained silent.

"I'll go up to Mrs. Belfield's room," he said presently, after walking up and down for a few minutes, while Mrs. Marrable still lingered, and still found occupation in the arrangement of the breakfast-table, where the silver kettle was boiling desperately over a spirit-lamp, and the eggs were cooking themselves as hard as stone in a patent egg-boiler.

"I may find some—some other letter," added Adrian. "You can come with me if you like."

Mrs. Marrable waited for no second invitation. She followed Sir Adrian to the rooms over the library, by the private staircase which Valentine had ascended and descended in the dead of the night.

The bed-room remained exactly as Adrian had seen it last night, except that the windows were open and the sunshine was streaming in and lighting up every corner. There was the spot where he had seen that prostrate form, with upturned face, and blood-stained forehead; there stood the table, with its litter of writing materials, scattered books, and vases of summer flowers, candles burnt low in the sockets of the massive old silver candlesticks, an arm-chair in front of the table, the chair in which she had been seated when she penned that fatal letter.

Two large oil-skin covered dress-baskets stood near the door, strapped and locked ready for departure. Doors of wardrobes were open, drawers and shelves were empty. Everything indicated preparations for departure. A travelling-bag upon the dressing-table was filled with ivory-backed brushes and perfume bottles, and all the necessities of a woman's toilet, leaving the table itself almost bare.

There could be no doubt that she had prepared for her departure; that she had deliberately planned her flight.

As he stood looking at these preparations, the meaning of the telegram flashed upon him. It was from St. Austell: a message invented to afford Helen an excuse for leaving the Abbey.

He looked round the room, moving slowly to and fro, while Mrs. Marrable's clear, honest eyes inspected everything, and while Mrs. Marrable's shrewd mind made its own conclusions. That letter—unfinished as it was—taken in conjunction with the packed boxes and dressing-bag, must mean a runaway wife; but how was it that the fugitive had left without taking her luggage, or making some arrangement for having it sent after her?

"I dare say she was afraid at the last, and dared not go off to the station with her boxes, as some have done, bolder than brass," thought Mrs. Marrable. "She'll write to *me*, perhaps, asking me to send her luggage somewhere. She'd never dare write to her ladyship."

There were no letters upon the writing-table—not a scrap of Helen's writing anywhere, except that one fatal letter in Sir Adrian's breast-pocket. There was no stain of blood upon the oak floor, yonder where she had fallen, or on the delicate chintz cover of the chair near which she fell.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Marrable, suddenly, "what's gone with the white Persian rug?"

Adrian affected ignorance.

"The beautiful white rug that used to lie in front of the writing-table. It was one of my lady's favourite rugs. She brought it down from London two years ago when she had been furnishing Mr. Belfield's house. It was in her own dressing-room till the other day, and then she says, 'Marrable, Mrs. Belfield is out of health, and coming to us to get strong. We must make her rooms as pretty as ever we can;' and this rug was brought here with a good many other things—that chair, and the Indian screen, for instance—at Lady Belfield's orders. And what can have become of the rug? It was here the day before yesterday when I brought in the clean linen."

"The housemaid must have moved it," said Adrian, looking out of the window. "You don't suppose Mrs. Belfield has packed it in one of her boxes, do you, Marrable?"

"No, sir, of course not. But that rug must be somewhere." And the housekeeper bustled off to investigate the matter.

Adrian turned away from the window, sick at heart.

Was life always to go on like this, for evermore, in alternate horror and shame: was he to feel always the murderer's terror of discovery, he who was guiltless of the murderer's crime? Where was Valentine, while the hours were going on, and the chances of inquiry becoming more hazardous? Had he gone back to London, to resume his old life, to brazen out his guilt by the careless ease of his manner as he trod the beaten track among his usual set? Would he try to prove an alibi were he ever called to question upon the business of last night? Had anybody seen him at the station or in the town? Had anybody heard him moving about the house?

At the Abbey there was no suspicion of anything worse than an elopement; but upon that question the Abbey servants had all made up their minds. Mrs. Belfield had carried out the intention announced in that letter which Jane had read upon her way downstairs. And, like a young and foolish thing as she was, she had gone off without her luggage, trusting to the

chapter of accidents for getting her property sent after her. They were all rather sorry for her, and they were also all agreed that this elopement had been inevitable from the very beginning—ay, that it had been foreseen by them, even while the sound of her wedding bells was still in the air.

"If she had wanted to be happy in her married life, she ought to have had Sir Adrian," said Mrs. Marrable; and everybody else agreed, as in duty bound.

There was a good deal of discussion as to how and when Mrs. Belfield had left the Abbey, and by what train she had gone; but this was finally settled to everybody's satisfaction. She had slipped out of the house a little before midnight; and she had walked quietly to the station and had taken her seat in the last train from Barnstaple, which would reach Exeter in time for the mail from Penzance. She would be at Paddington early in the morning. Her lover would meet her somewhere on the road, most likely.

There was very little question as to the name of the lover. Sanderson had been at the Alexandra with Lady Belfield, and had gone to and fro between the hotel and Wilkie Mansions with messages, and had seen Lord St. Austell at Mrs. Belfield's and at Mrs. Baddeley's, and had heard things. Even the little page had his opinions, and had expressed himself freely as to Mr. Belfield's short-sightedness. Sanderson was too good a servant to talk much upon such delicate subjects; but she had talked a little to Mrs. Marrable in the confidential half-hour after supper. Nobody in the housekeeper's room or the servants' hall doubted that Mrs. Belfield had gone off with Lord St. Austell.

CHAPTER XXX.

UNDER THE RUSHES

Sir Adrian sat in the library, or sauntered about the lawn and shrubberies near the house, all that long, heavy day. He dared not leave the premises just yet—so intense was his dread of some new catastrophe. He wanted to be there to face the worst that could happen; to be at hand to answer questions, or to meet calamity with a bold front.

Once he went down to the river, and looked at that rushy pool where his brother's victim was lying. The water scarcely rippled in the still summer air: the lights and shadows played

upon the surface of the pool; the sunbeams glinted among the reeds, tremulous, uncertain, as the leafy branches moved softly overhead. It was a lovely afternoon. He had come there to fish upon many such afternoons in years that were gone. That little creek under the willows, and its sheltered bank, had been a favourite spot with him. To-day he lingered there, listening to the faint plashing of the water, and watching the bright-winged insects as they dipped and fluttered on the dark surface of the pool, and then skimmed away, azure, transparent, beautiful, like spots of living light.

How calm the place was, and how hard it was for Adrian's over-wrought brain to realize the horror lying there. He stood staring blankly at the dark water, and almost wondering whether there were any reality in last night's experiences—whether the whole tragedy from first to last were not an hallucination of his own.

He went back to the Abbey, dreading to find that something had happened during his absence, brief as it had been. A constable from Chadford, or a detective from Scotland Yard, would be waiting for him perhaps; or there would be some frightful news of his brother: a suicide found in some sequestered spot upon the moor, a mutilated corpse borne home upon a shutter. No; there was nothing changed on his return. The house had an air of death-like stillness. The venetians were closed outside those windows above the library. He could picture his brother's wife lying there on her white bed, with folded hands, and limbs decently composed, under the lavender-scented sheet.

That would have been horrible—untimely death in one so fair and light-minded would have seemed a reversal of Nature's common law; but, oh, how light a calamity compared with that which had happened!

He went into the library. His open piano, his books upon the reading-table, his desk and papers, the grave old organ yonder in the deep recess by the high oak chimney-piece, the organ he had so loved—all those things which made up the occupation, interest, and pleasure of his daily life—all were there as they had been yesterday; but they could yield him neither delight nor comfort—no, not one minute's respite or distraction.

He sat at his book-table with folded arms, and his forehead resting upon them, shutting out the light of day, trying to think out the situation, with all its sickening perplexities. His mother had told him to communicate with Helen's father, but he shrank with abhorrence from the task. What could he say which would not be a lie? To say that she had fled would be to malign the dead; to say anything else would be to endanger his brother.

He had to shield the wrongdoer at any cost—for his mother's sake.

When last heard of, Colonel Deverill had been yachting in the Hebrides with a wealthy ship-builder of Glasgow. He had given his address at a club in that city. "Wherever I am in August and September any letters sent to the Imperial will find me," he had told his daughters. "I am sure to get them sooner or later."

As the Colonel rarely answered anybody's letters it did not seem of much consequence where they were sent in the first instance. People who were bent upon writing to him might as well address him at a Glasgow club as anywhere else.

Adrian told himself that to let the day pass without making any attempt at communicating with the Colonel would be to create evidence against his brother, a point upon which some future investigator might put his finger, saying, here is one small fact incompatible with innocence. He remembered how in most of the great criminal trials he had read the balance of proof hung upon infinitesimals; trifling circumstances, which at the moment of their occurrence seemed to the criminal of hardly any consequence, and which yet were strong enough to hang him.

He seated himself at his writing-table, and slowly, after much irresolution, wrote his message—

"From Adrian Belfield, Chadford, to Colonel Deverill, Imperial Club, Glasgow.

"Mrs. Belfield has left the Abbey suddenly, leaving a letter which involves trouble for us all. Her husband is in London. Kindly communicate with him."

There was not much in this. It committed the sender to very little. It would in all probability be long in reaching the Colonel; and in the meantime Valentine might have got away from England, beyond the reach of pursuit, should suspicion be directed towards him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"EXCEPT AN ERRING SISTER'S SHAME"

Lady Belfield and her maid arrived in London while the sun was still bright, and the town had its afternoon aspect. All the Royal Oak omnibuses were faring eastward or westward, and the scanty carriage population were rolling in at the Marble Arch, to circulate drearily in a deserted Park. Constance Belfield saw the whole scene dimly, like figures in a dream; the

flaunting flower beds with their overgrown geraniums in riotous bloom, the palms and tree ferns, and second-rate landaus and doubtful victorias, the country cousins and the shabby liveries, all the genteel squalor of West End London when rank and fashion and wealth have fled. She was driving across the Park in one of the little hired broughams from the station, hurrying to her son in an agony of morbid anticipation, conjuring up visions of horror as she went. She could hardly speak when she alighted at Wilkie Mansions, leaving Sanderson in the carriage. She seated herself in the lift dumbly, and let the porter take her up to the third floor.

The maid who opened the door stared in blank astonishment, expecting to see no one less than Lady Belfield, and having a guilty consciousness of the military hovering near, if not actually on the premises.

"Is your master here—and very ill?" gasped Lady Belfield, passing the girl hurriedly, and going straight to her son's bed-room.

"No, my lady, master hasn't come back from York. He went at the beginning of the week, and he wasn't to be back till to-day, or perhaps Monday."

Not back from York, and the telegram was from South Kensington! Lady Belfield's brain began to swim. York! There might have been an accident at York perhaps—on the railway—on the racecourse. He might have been riding in a steeplechase. Her notion of York Summer Meeting was very vague: she could hardly draw distinctions between the Knavesmire and Sandown Park. Her vivid fancy conjured up the vision of a broken fence, a fallen horse and rider lying in one heap of death under the summer sun.

"Do you know if anything has happened to your master?" she asked. "Have you heard of anything?" And then, seeing the girl's ignorance depicted in her face, she asked suddenly:

"Is Mrs. Baddeley at home?"

"Yes, my lady. She came home last Tuesday, and is to be at home till the middle of next week, *ong parsong*, the page says."

Lady Belfield waited for no more. She crossed the landing and sounded the electric bell at Mrs. Baddeley's door. The page admitted her immediately, having been made to understand that he held his place on the condition of never keeping a visitor over two seconds at the door. He might read as many novels as he liked, and might be as lazy as he liked; but the ordeal by patience which middle-aged and portly butlers inflict upon visitors was not to be inflicted by him. He flung open the drawing-room door with an air, and announced "Lady Belfield."

Mrs. Baddeley was en déshabille, muffled in some loose garment of white cashmere and peacock plush, half à la Watteau, half à la Grecque, handsome and indolent, with a novel lying on the sofa—all three volumes open, as if she had been dipping here and there in the story for interesting bits—a silver-gilt chocolate pot and Dresden cup and saucer on the spindle-legged table at her side, and Tory reposing at the end of the sofa.

She started up to receive Lady Belfield without knocking over the table, or disturbing the dog, who opened his yellow eyes and blinked at the visitor in sleepy indifference. All her movements were graceful and sinuous, and she circulated among her archipelago of dainty tables as easily as a snake glides in and out of the bracken.

"Dearest Lady Belfield, I am delighted!" she exclaimed. "Is Helen with you?"

"No, she is not with me. God knows where she is, poor, wretched, lost creature. But I want to know about my son. He telegraphed for his wife. He must be ill."

"He is not much given to worrying about his wife when he is well, I admit," said Leo, "but what do you mean by talking about my sister as a lost creature, Lady Belfield? Are you out of your mind?"

"I shall be if I don't find my son. For God's sake, tell me the truth, whatever it is. Where is Valentine—what ails him? Why did he telegraph for his wife this morning?"

"I know nothing about your son, Lady Belfield. He has lived at his clubs mostly since Helen went to you. I scarcely ever see him in this house. He is always going off to some race-meeting. This week he is at York; two or three weeks hence he will be at Doncaster. I have long ceased to trouble myself about his movements."

"He telegraphed this morning—at half-past seven—from South Kensington!"

"Then I suppose he is in South Kensington—and alive, or he could not have telegraphed. And now, Lady Belfield, tell me about my sister, if you please. By what right do you talk of her as a lost creature? What has she done?"

"She has left my house—she has dishonoured her husband."

"How dare you say that? By what right?"

Leonora Baddeley had placed herself between the visitor and the drawing-room door, as if to keep Lady Belfield there by force, were it necessary. She stood there drawn to her fullest height, with an angry spot of crimson flaming in the centre of each cheek, her eyes flashing, her lips quivering, and yet with a rigid look, as if the whole face were turning into stone.

"She has gone off, then!" she cried. "Oh, what art, what

hypocrisy, what finished acting! She fled to you for shelter in the hour of temptation. She buried herself in the country; she hid herself from the world; and she has gone off after all. *That* is what it all meant—the tears—the doleful looks—the flying from the seducer. She has gone off with him! Oh, what villany—what villany!"

Tears came into her flashing eyes—tears of agony, or of rage. She dashed them fiercely away, whichever they were.

"How do you know that she has gone off with any one?" she asked suddenly.

"I have a letter in which she confesses her guilty determination, a letter in which she tells my son, deliberately, that she has ceased to love him, and is going away with another man whom she loves as passionately as he loves her."

"As he loves her," echoed Leo, with a mocking laugh. "God help her if she builds her hopes on his love. God help her if she counts upon that for future happiness—or for bread-and-cheese. God help her next year when he is tired of her, and leaves her to die in a ditch like any other drab."

"Mrs. Baddeley, is it womanly to talk of any woman as you are talking, most of all to talk thus of a sister—a sister you once loved?"

"Yes, I know, I loved her well enough once. But am I to love the woman who—God help us all, Lady Belfield. I am mad when I think of my sister—and that man."

"You suspect some one then? You know who has tempted her away?"

"Do you mean to say *you* don't know?"

"Indeed I do not."

"Did you ever see her with St. Austell? Did you ever see those two together, Lady Belfield, for ten minutes—for five—for one? One minute would have been enough, if you had eyes."

"Yes, I have seen them together. I feared it must be he."

"You feared!" cried Leo contemptuously. "Why you must have known that it was so. It was not possible to doubt her folly, or his infatuation. Do you know how long Lord St. Austell's infatuations usually last, Lady Belfield?"

"Indeed I do not. I know nothing about him, except that he has a bad name."

"His lordship's grand passions—his eternal irrepressible self-sacrificing amours—last about as long as his dress suits. I believe he has a new one every season. To say that my sister has gone off with him is to say that she has gone to unmitigated ruin."

"It would be unmitigated ruin in any case," said Lady Belfield.

"Oh, no, it wouldn't. There are mitigations. There are men

who will marry a woman when she is divorced, they being the cause of that divorce. Lord St. Austell won't. *Pas si bête.* There are men who will move heaven and earth to protect the woman they have ruined from the risk of becoming a pauper. Lord St. Austell would think any tolerably clean workhouse good enough for his victim, when he had grown tired of her. God help my sister when her brief day of bliss is over. It will be a dream," said Mrs. Baddeley, clasping her hands before her eyes, and speaking in a softened voice, as if she were dreaming that dream, "a golden dream in a golden land, with a man whose voice is like music, whose talk has a magical power, who can make life worth living. Yes, if it were in an attic in a back street in the shabbiest quarter of Paris, or in a third-rate hotel in the dullest town along the Riviera. It will be a blissful dream; but it won't last long. It will be gone like other dreams —and she will wake to misery."

"Help me to save her, if you can," said Lady Belfield. "Her honour and good name are lost beyond redemption, I fear: but let us save her from the misery of her position—from the dreadful chances of the future. Let us find her, and get her away from that villain, and put her somewhere in safe and gentle care. I have loved her as my daughter, Leonora. I would do anything in this world to help her—and I think Adrian would too, even in her degradation—even in spite of the disgrace she has brought upon us. She has broken for ever with her husband—she can never be anything to him again; but she is your sister—and," added Lady Belfield with streaming eyes, "in the day of her sorrow and remorse she shall be once again my daughter."

"You are a noble woman," said Mrs. Baddeley, with a touch of softer feeling than she had shown hitherto, "and I wish I were like you. I wish my sister had been worthier of your affection. Her day of sorrow will come soon enough. Have no doubt of that—with *him*."

Her passion, that white hot rage which had transformed her from a woman into a fury, was calmed all at once. She burst into sudden tears, and, after a fit of sobbing, became womanlike again.

"Poor Helen," she sighed, "poor deluded girl. May I see the letter?"

"No, it was meant for her husband's eyes only. I will show it to no one else."

"When did she leave the Abbey?"

"Early this morning, before any of the servants were astir. No one saw or heard her go. She must have gone some distance on foot."

"Not far, you may be sure. St. Austell would be somewhere near with a carriage. He has plenty of experience, and

he would do things handsomely *at first*. Did she take any luggage?"

"Nothing. All was packed ready to go. She had not even taken her dressing-bag, Sanderson told me. Sanderson was in her room with the housemaid this morning."

"Yes, I can fancy them prying and exploring. How like Helen to pack her boxes and leave them all behind her, trusting to the chapter of accidents for getting them again. How like Helen to elope without so much as a brush and comb. St. Austell will have to buy her a trousseau. I wonder how he will like that?"

"You don't suppose that I shall detain her property? Her trunks will be sent to her as soon as it is known where she is."

"Will not that be to encourage her in sin? Better starve her into swift repentance by the loss of her jewels and gowns. I don't think St. Austell will cover her with diamonds. He will give her sweet words."

"Pray do not talk of them like that, as if sorrow and sin were a theme for laughter."

"Oh, there is a ridiculous side to every subject," said Leo hysterically. "Do you suppose I am not sorry for her because my sorrow is mixed with scorn?"

"I would rather see you more serious, more sisterly. Are you convinced that it is Lord St. Austell who has tempted her away?"

"As certain as if I had seen them driving away from your park gate this morning. I tell you their attachment was notorious. They were invited out together like man and wife—only on different cards. If it had been in Italy, their names would have been on the same card. People are fond of St. Austell for his cleverness and pleasant ways, and every one is indulgent to him and his fancy of the moment. I might have told you they would run away; only even I was duped by Helen's flight to the Abbey, and fancied her safe under your wing. He gave out a few weeks ago that he was ordered to the East—something wrong with his lungs. His lungs are always out of order when he wants an excuse for leaving England. He talked everywhere of wintering in Egypt or in Ceylon. I thought that meant mischief—but I did not think my sister would disgrace herself, infatuated as she was."

And then, on being shown the telegram, Mrs. Baddeley at once denounced St. Austell as the sender. The message was intended to serve Helen as an excuse for getting away: a hasty summons from her husband, an order she could not disobey.

"Some creature of his sent it, while he was in Devonshire, close at hand, ready to join her directly she was clear of the Abbey."

"But she started before the telegram arrived," argued Lad Belfield.

"A *malentendu* of some kind, and again very like my sister. She is the spirit of disorder—loses her head on the slightest occasion. Everything was deliberately planned by him, no doubt. *He* is coolness personified. She forgot all his instructions at the last, and ran out of your house like a mad thing."

After this came a silence of some duration. Lady Belfield sat in a dejected attitude, trying to realize the situation and all its hopelessness. Leo paced the room with hurried steps, stopping every now and then, as if panting for air. The windows were all open, and the rolling wheels, light and heavy, sounded in the high road, muffled by distance, monotonous as the roaring of the sea; while that inevitable street cry from some invisible slum rose shrill upon the nearer silence now and again like the shriek of the Banshee.

"I shall have to tell my son," said Lady Belfield at last. "Where am I to find him?"

"He is at York, I believe—at the Station Hotel, with Beeching. He was to be Beeching's guest for the race week."

"And the races are not over yet?"

"To-day is the last day."

"I must go to York. I must break this trouble to him."

"You had better telegraph to him to come to you. He will know his trouble soon enough. I don't think it will break his heart, Lady Belfield. If he had cared very much for my sister he would not have neglected her as he has done ever since their honeymoon."

"He has been to blame, I know; but for all that I believe he was deeply attached to his wife, and that the blow will be heavy. Good-bye, Mrs. Baddeley; I must go and write my telegrams. I shall stay in your sister's rooms all to-day, in the hope of Valentine's return; but I shall sleep at the Alexandra."

Leo followed Lady Belfield to the door, subdued, and even affectionate.

"Let me give you some tea at once, and some dinner by-and-by," she pleaded. "You are looking so white and worn after your journey."

"You are very good, but I would rather be alone. Phœbe will get me some tea."

Phœbe was the Devonshire parlourmaid, a *protégée* of Lady Belfield's, delighted to be useful to her.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ONCE IS A WIDE WORD

Mrs. Baddeley stood watching till the opposite door closed upon Valentine's mother. Then she went hurriedly back to her drawing-room and looked at the clock.

"A quarter to six. More than two hours before the start of the Continental mail," she calculated. "If they left Chadford early this morning they must be in London now—at his house perhaps. The safest place, he would think."

She kept her finger on the electric bell till the page was in the room.

"Get me a hansom directly, and send Perker to me," she said.

Perker was her maid, with whose assistance she changed her flowing Grecian robe for a trim tailor gown and a little cloth toque to match, in less than ten minutes. She was sitting in the cab before she had finished putting on her gloves, sitting with resolute brows and clenched teeth, driving to Park Lane.

"If I can save her I will," she thought. "I am about the only person who can do it."

There are only a few small houses in Park Lane, and those few are distinctly precious, and rented far above their value; for it is an inestimable privilege to live in that exalted situation without having to maintain a palace. Lord St. Austell was one of the privileged householders. He had secured the short remainder of a lease of a small house at a corner, a house which to the casual eye seemed all balcony and flower-pot, but which contained three or four comfortable rooms, with old-fashioned panelling and low ceilings.

It was not the first time Mrs. Baddeley had visited the corner house in Park Lane; but she had never been there alone until to-day. She had gone with one or two chosen friends to take afternoon tea in the low countrified drawing-room, with its lively outlook upon the flower-beds and the carriages and the crowd. She had been there on Wednesdays to see the coaches go by, and to eat strawberries and cream and ices from Grange's, and to look at Lord St. Austell's books. He was an amateur in books of the lighter sort, and in bindings, and was proud of showing his latest acquisitions. He used laughingly to declare that he had only half-a-dozen tea-spoons, but, so far as they went, they and his tea were at the service of his friends. Mrs. Baddeley might take whom she pleased to Number 333

Park Lane, provided she kept within the limit of the six teaspoons. "They are all that remain of the famous St. Austell plate," he said.

"What, was all the rest melted down for King Charles?" asked Leo.

"No; a good deal of it was sold off to oblige Colonel Montressor, *alias* Ikey Moses, the West End money-lender," replied St. Austell.

His lordship's butler knew Mrs. Baddeley, and offered no hindrance to her entrance, as she brushed past him and went into the room at the back of the dining-room; library, *tabagie*, or den—the room in which St. Austell wrote his letters in the morning, and read Zola or Guy de Maupassant after midnight—a long, irregular-shaped room, lined with book-shelves, and furnished with miscellaneous souvenirs of Italy and the East.

St. Austell was in his usual seat before the writing-table, looking through a pile of letters and papers which had accumulated in a four-days' absence. A hat-box, a travelling desk, and a case of umbrellas and canes lay on the ground near him. His luggage had been sent on to Charing Cross.

He looked up at Leonora with angry surprise.

"I told Morgan I was not at home," he said.

"Did you really? But you see I didn't ask Morgan's opinion upon that subject. Instinct told me I should find you here."

"You are such a clever woman. I am only sorry that I am too busy to enjoy your conversation just now," said St. Austell, going on with his letters; "but you may as well sit down all the same. I have only a couple of hours to settle my affairs, dine, and start for Dover."

"You are going to Paris, I suppose?"

"I am going to Ceylon—but one has always to begin with Paris: it is the turnstile in the gate that leads everywhere."

"You are not going alone," said Mrs. Baddeley, very pale and very resolute.

"Of course not. I take my servant. If I could afford it I would take my doctor. I am going abroad for my health."

"That is a lie. You are going with my sister. It is on Helen's account that you are going to Ceylon. You think you can hide yourself there with your latest mistress, escape from her infuriated husband. I doubt if Mr. Belfield is the kind of husband to take things altogether quietly. There is a good deal of the original savage in him—a kind of man to settle matters with a revolver, as they used to do in America a few years ago, when New York was further from London and Paris than it is now."

"I am glad to say that I am not afraid of Mr. Belfield, and I am sorry to say that I am not running away with his wife,"

said St. Austell, without looking up from the letter he was reading.

"You would like me to believe you, I suppose," muttered Mrs. Baddeley, beating the devil's tattoo upon the faded Indian prayer-rug.

"I am much too busy to care whether you believe or disbelieve me. Haven't I told you that I have to settle my affairs, financial and otherwise, and dine before eight o'clock? If you have any idea that I am hiding your sister in this house, *par exemple*, you had better go through all the rooms and look in all the closets while I finish my work here. When you have set your mind at ease by doing that, perhaps you will honour me by sharing my sole and my chicken."

"You mocking devil, I'll take you at your word," said Leo, starting up and moving towards the door. "I know she left Chadford with you this morning. I know that, I tell you. She must be in this house—or waiting for you at the station. Where else could she be? And you could hardly leave her at the station."

"Try this house," said St. Austell, still without looking up. "The investigation will occupy you till dinner time, and enable me to finish my business here."

"I will," she said, lingering near the door, and looking doubtingly at his imperturbable face.

His coolness puzzled her, and she hesitated. She knew him well enough to know that he was capable of being as coolly defiant, although Helen were in the next room. So, after all, imperturbability counted for very little.

She went into the hall, and looked into the dining-room. The table, shrunk to a circle, was laid for one. The room was empty. She ran up to the drawing-rooms, and pulled aside portières, and looked into corners, and behind the piano, and shook a week's dust out of the fresh, pure-looking chintz curtains. She was not satisfied even with this, and hastily explored the upper floor—bed-room, dressing-room, boot-room, bath-room, servants' rooms—ashamed of herself, and giving only a hurried glance in at each door. It was but the work of ten minutes in all.

"Have you looked in the kitchens and the cellars?" asked St. Austell, when she returned to his den, crimson with shame, and out of breath.

"She will meet you at the station, or she is waiting for you there," said Leo.

"I hope I may find her there. It would be a pleasant surprise. May I tell them to lay a knife and fork for you?" he asked, rising and going towards the bell.

"Certainly not. I shall not detain you much longer."

"So sorry that I should be obliged to count the moments

in such charming society," murmured St. Austell, putting away his papers, and locking his despatch-box. "I have finished my work for the moment; I am quite at your service," he said, leaning his back against the mantel-piece, in his favourite attitude, his slender, languid figure and pale oval face accentuated by the background of old Italian oak, and the vivid colouring of brass and copper, vermilion and orange pottery, and precious goblets of pale green jade.

"You think that you can deceive me, St. Austell," Leo began passionately, standing with one knee upon the seat of a prie-Dieu chair, and with her hands clasped tightly on the carved cherry-wood back; "you think I have been blind all this time—that I have not understood what was going on between you and my sister."

"Upon my honour, my dear Leo, I have thought nothing about you, either one way or the other. When a man is desperately in love with one woman, he has very little leisure for abstruse speculations upon the sentiments of another woman."

"Not even when he once made passionate love to that other woman?"

"Once, Leo? Once is a wide word. The butterflies were once grubs. This world was once a misty nucleus floating in unimaginable space. I know that I was once in love with you—passionately, as you say—and that I once pursued you—and that you encouraged my pursuit until it reached just that one definite point at which it became inconvenient and dangerous, and then you threw me over, as you have thrown over so many better men—poor young Stroud, for instance, who lost his head and consoled himself with a bullet. There are men who do not relish being fooled and flung up, you see, Leo. The foolish ones shoot themselves. The wiser go away and forget you, as I did. We are not all patient beasts of burden after the manner of Beeching."

"Yes, you forgot me—forgot—forgot!" repeated Leonora, in a choking voice. "I suppose you thought I did not care for you?"

"That was precisely my idea."

"You did not know. You shall never know. I would cut my tongue out sooner than tell you. And you upbraid me with those sweet days when I could think of you as my friend—when I saw you every day without reproach of conscience—when——"

"When you fooled me to the top of my bent."

"I was so happy—until you threw off the mask; and then I could but remember that I had a good kind fellow in India working for his country and me."

"And that you had a character to lose, and that it is not a

pleasant thing to be cut by other women—even the rather easy-going women in your set. They have their standard. So far and no further is the motto of the clan. Oh, my dear Mrs. Baddeley, sentimentality won't answer between you and me. You are one of the cleverest women I know. You know the age you live in, and you are able to live up to its requirements. You manage to get everything in this world that you want—without any sacrifice, even of character. But you must not expect more than that."

"I expect nothing from you," she answered moodily. "But I mean to know the truth. Why are you going to Ceylon?"

"For my lungs."

"Oh, I have heard that before. That is an old story."

"A true one, all the same. The right lung is decidedly affected, and my doctor insists upon a warm climate. Perhaps were that the only motive, I might have wintered at Bournemouth or Ventnor, but I had another motive, which so far has been thwarted."

Mrs. Baddeley sank into a chair, and there was a silence of some minutes, while the gentleman lighted a cigarette, and while the lady gave herself up to reflection.

He was lying to her, this arch deceiver, this consummate hypocrite, whose countenance defied her scrutiny. There could be no doubt that Helen had run away with him. The fact that she had eloped was indisputable; and this was the only man who had exercised any influence over her. There had never been any confidences on this subject between the sisters; but Leonora knew of her sister's infatuation all the same.

She looked at St. Austell curiously, as he lounged in front of the mantel-piece smoking his cigarette. He was very pale, and there was a drawn look about his mouth which indicated worry and trouble of some kind. It was not the face of a successful lover. There was no sparkle of triumph or of hope in his eyes. The man who runs off with his friend's wife ought to look as if the gates of Paradise were opening before him; but this man looked as if he was on the threshold of Orcus.

"How's Tory?" he asked, when the silence began to grow oppressive.

"Tory is in excellent health, thanks. And you are really going to Paris by the mail?"

"Really."

"And you still protest that you are going there alone?"

"I have never protested. I simply stated a fact. I go to Paris with my servant, that is all. If you want particulars, I shall put up at the Hotel de Bade. I shall amuse myself in Paris for a week or so; and then I shall go quietly on to Brindisi, stopping wherever I feel disposed. I shall go by the

Rapide as far as Macon, and then in all probability I shall make a *détour*, and cool myself on the Riffel before I dawdle down into Italy. It will be time enough if I sail in October."

"A charming programme, with a sympathetic companion," sneered Mrs. Baddeley; "but as a solitary promenade I should consider it rather dreary. One knows all those places beforehand, and at our age"—with a deprecating shrug—"they are only storehouses for memories and regrets. The world is hardly large enough now-a-days for people who have the capacity to live and to remember."

"I am not afraid of solitude. I am egotist enough to find myself tolerable company."

"I have a good mind to share your chicken and your cab to Charing Cross," said Mrs. Baddeley, after a few moments' reflection. "There are some friends of mine at Dover who have been plaguing me to go and see them. I might run down for a day or two—take them by surprise as they are yawning in their lodging-house lamplight, after having exhausted the newspapers and their own conversation."

"Do," cried St. Austell; "you would burst upon them with as revivifying a power as if you were Aurora. And how nice for me to have you for a travelling companion. One generally gets from London to Dover in an after-dinner nap, but of course that is only a *pis-aller*."

"I won't rob you of your sleep," said Leo, starting up to go, with an air of having come to a sudden decision. "I won't go to Dover to-night. And I have just remembered that Tory will be waiting for his chop. He always dines an hour before I do, so that he may behave prettily and be society for me while I dine."

"Happy Tory. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. It means for a long time, doesn't it?" she said as she shook hands, his fingers detaining the neatly gloved hand just a shade longer than they need have done, with a faint reminiscence of a worn-out sentiment.

"Who knows?"

"Ceylon is so far."

"There is no such thing as distance now-a-days. Australia means five weeks—no other place need count. I'll see you to your carriage."

He put her into the hansom, which had waited for her, and which rattled her back to Wilkie Mansions in a quarter of an hour. She kept her word so far as the poodle was concerned, and looked on while he ate his chop, daintily, on a plate set upon a table-napkin. She saw him safely through his meal, and then changed her smart tailor gown for the dowdiest thing she possessed in the way of gowns—a black silk and cashmere

of two years ago. In this and a black bonnet and rather thick veil, she might easily escape recognition in the lamplight at a crowded station.

She drove to Charing Cross, and was in the station just a quarter of an hour before the departure of the Continental mail. She saw St. Austell's valet getting the luggage registered—a good deal of luggage, but all distinctly masculine. She saw St. Austell himself buying newspapers at the stall. She saw him pass through the gate on his way to the train—alone; and she saw no feminine figure that bore the faintest resemblance to her sister.

"She is to meet him in Paris," thought Leo. "It has been all planned beforehand; she will go by another route perhaps. From Exeter to Southampton and thence to Havre and Paris. By that way she would escape observation. Yes, she will join him in Paris. That is the reason he took things so quietly. God help her—and me."

She gave a long sigh—regretful, passionate, despairing even—and stood near the gate while the whistle shrieked and the Continental express moved slowly out of the great vaulted station into the summer twilight. The last rays of the setting sun gleamed on the brazen engine as it steamed away, taking St. Austell to warmer skies and faint sweet odours and spice-bearing trees and tropical flowers. How long might it be before they two would meet again. In any case he was lost to her. He had been dead to her ever since he began to fall in love with her sister—dead by the worst of deaths, the death of indifference verging upon scorn. Once he had been at her feet, the chosen companion in a round of fashionable dissipations, bound by no tie but mutual tastes and mutual pleasures, and she had fancied those flowery chains of hers were strong enough to keep him for ever.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LIKE A ROMAN

Lady Belfield went back to the Abbey after having spent nearly a week in London, without having obtained any tidings of Valentine. He had not appeared at Wilkie Mansions; he had not written either to his mother or to his wife.

That anxious mother had looked through the newspapers every morning and evening, fearing to read of some accident to

her son, but the papers had told her nothing. She had questioned Phœbe, who assured her that there was nothing unusual in Mr. Belfield's prolonged absence. He would tell them that he was going away for a week, and he would stop for a fortnight, without writing to his wife of the change in his plans. Sometimes he would send a telegram, but not always. It was his way.

His mother knew very few of his friends, and those few had left London. She had no means of obtaining information as to his whereabouts, yet she was intensely anxious to see him, to be the first to tell him of Helen's flight. She went back to her country home deeply despondent, dreading to re-enter the house upon which so dark a shadow had fallen. She had been away only a week, yet the sense of trouble and apprehension had hung so heavily upon her, that it seemed a long time since she had crossed that familiar threshold. She looked at the landscape with a vague wonder as the train drew near home, astonished to find the foliage unchanged, the light and colouring almost the same.

Adrian was at the station to receive her. If the landscape were unaltered, there was a marked change in her son. He looked thin and wasted, his eyes were sunken, and his cheeks colourless.

"I am heartily glad to get you back," he said. "You see there was nothing amiss with Valentine. Your fears there were needless."

Nothing amiss! How keenly the falsehood of those words stung him as he spoke them; but it would be the business of his life henceforward to deceive his mother, in the endeavour to save her from overwhelming misery. To betray Valentine's ghastly secret would be to break her heart.

"No, I suppose there is nothing wrong," answered Lady Belfield, "but I was disappointed at not being able to see him. I wanted to tell him that which he must be told sooner or later. It will be harder to hear it from a stranger. Is there any news of Helen?"

This last question was asked in a subdued tone, like an inquiry about one who is dead.

"No; nor likely to be, I should think."

"She has not sent for her luggage?"

"No."

"That is strange."

"Don't you think, mother," Adrian began gravely, "that as this misfortune is without remedy—a trouble which no act of yours or mine can ever modify in the future; for which thought and counsel can provide no help—it would be far best that we should never more talk of that trouble, nor of Helen. She is

gone from us. Let us think of her tenderly and in silence, as of one whom death has taken from us, under saddest circumstances."

"You are right, perhaps, so far as that silence will be best. It makes one's heart ache to utter her name, the name she has disgraced, the sweet girlish name which seemed so suited to her girlish beauty," answered Lady Belfield, in slow and sad tones, as the carriage rolled along the road where she had driven with Helen only the other day, the same scent of autumn flowers, late-lingering woodbine, travellers' joy, and wild thyme on the air; "but I am not going to think of her as among the dead. I look forward to the day when her eyes will be opened to her sin, when I may take her back to my heart, crushed and broken, perhaps, but redeemed from among the lost. I do not forget the parable of the piece of silver. I hope to find my lost one before I die."

Adrian did not answer. He sat looking at the tangled blackberry hedge, with its luxuriance of leaf and bramble, clusters of blossoms and fruit, in all its stages between bud and berry. The sky shone blue behind the tracery of branch and leaf. A newly turned field beyond sent up cool odours from the rich red earth. All things were beautiful in the stillness of afternoon, a golden afternoon, steeped in warmth and light; but in his breast there was not one gleam of hope.

Everything at the Abbey was ordered as of old. Lady Belfield's rooms were a haven of repose and comfort, full of flowers and perfume, and beautiful objects; all things in their right places, no confusion, no overcrowding of ornaments or furniture, not a discordant note amidst the whole. If externals could make the sum of happiness, Lady Belfield and her son had every reason to be happy.

She sat in the library with Adrian after dinner, and asked him to play to her. He chose the organ rather than the piano to-night, and played some favourite numbers from one of Mozart's masses. Those solemn and pathetic strains had a soothing influence upon them both, and seemed to lift them above the region of their own troubles.

He was still playing when Lady Belfield started up at another sound from without, the sound of wheels in the avenue.

"It must be Valentine," she said, as Adrian left the organ and went towards the door.

"Don't be too sure of that, mother. It may be Colonel Deverill, or somebody from him."

They went to the hall together, and the bell rang just as Adrian opened the door. The carriage was a fly from the station, and the arrival was Valentine.

He kissed his mother, and shook hands with Adrian, as easily as if all things were going well with him.

"Here I am at last," he said, "and very tired."

"Where have you come from, Val?" asked his mother, looking at him anxiously in the lamplight.

He was smiling at her, evidently ignorant of the trouble that had fallen upon him; yet there was a change in him, his mother thought, a change which she could not define. Every feature seemed to have hardened and sharpened in outline. He had grown thinner, perhaps, and was worn with travelling and excitement of some kind.

"I have come from Paris. I went over there after the York summer. I was in a furious temper, and I felt that nothing less than a week's rest on the other side of the Channel would quiet my nerves."

"Things have gone wrong with you at York then?" said his mother.

"Damnably wrong. The horse I had backed proved a duffer. Where's my wife?"

His mother laid her hand upon his shoulder caressingly, and answered in a voice broken by tears:

"Come to my room with me, Valentine. I have something very sad to tell you."

"Put it into as few words as you can," he said. "Perhaps I can guess it. She has run away from me, I suppose."

"Yes, Valentine. She has left you. How came you to guess——"

"Oh, only because the kind of thing is fashionable—and she liked to be in the fashion. Don't look at me like that, mother, for God's sake. Whatever I may have to bear, I can bear it best by myself. Nobody can lighten my burden for me. Come now, I'll make a compact with you. Don't you ever speak to me about Helen, and I'll never plague you by any complaints. If you—and Adrian—like to have me here, I'll come and go as I used when I was a bachelor, and let the past three years be wiped off the slate. Forget that I have ever been anything but what I used to be before Colonel Deverill took Morcomb."

"Of course we shall like to have you here, Valentine. This is your natural home, and here you are always welcome."

"Thank you, mother. I shall sell the furniture, and get rid of my Kensington flat as soon as I can."

He had taken the matter so coolly, had dismissed the subject so briefly, that his mother wondered at the ease with which the bad news had been broken, and when she went back to the library with her two sons, she felt as if the burden of grief had been lightened. No doubt it was wisest to try to forget; to forbid the utterance of a fatal name. Let life slip back into former grooves, if possible. Valentine would have his old occu-

pations, his old amusements, horses, dogs, guns, country race meetings, occasional holidays in London with college chums. His life need not be empty or purposeless, even after this great sorrow. She did not contemplate the legal consequences of a wife's infidelity; the possibilities of a release for the injured husband. Her tender nature took only the woman's view of the circumstances, and to her such a loss and such a sorrow were enough to darken a lifetime. Her younger son, therefore, had a new claim upon her love.

She gave him Helen's unfinished letter, when they parted that night, without a word, and he was equally silent about it next day.

He never re-entered the rooms he had occupied with his wife, but resumed possession of his old quarters over the billiard-room—the rooms that had been his from the time he left the nursery, a bed-room and dressing-room adjoining, with windows looking into the stable yard, windows from which he could watch his horses being washed of a morning or taken out for exercise, and from which he could give his orders to the grooms. These rooms were remote from the library wing, had another aspect, and belonged to a different period of architecture.

In a week, Valentine had settled down to his old life, and was going out cub-hunting every other morning. He was dull and silent of an evening, tired after his early morning with the hounds, and he seemed to have lost a good deal of the elasticity of youth; but, upon the whole, his mother felt very well content that things were no worse with him. It was an unspeakable comfort to her to have him under her roof, to see him resume the old life. She did not know of the sleepless nights—the awful hours when the house was wrapped in darkness, and the sinner paced his room, alone with the memory of his sin.

Between Valentine and his brother there had not been one word about that fatal night. Adrian had felt that silence—complete silence—was alone possible. To live together in peace they must both studiously avoid every reference to that hidden crime; they must both appear to forget, albeit both knew that forgetfulness on either side was hopeless.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHAT HER FATHER THOUGHT

NEARLY six weeks had passed before there was any sign from Colonel Deverill. He had left Scotland before the telegram reached Glasgow. He had been yachting in the Mediterranean, and the message had been delivered to him finally, after many vicissitudes, at Ajaccio. After that he had lost no time in crossing to Nice, and making his way to England and Belfield Abbey.

There was not much that he had to say when he arrived, and very little that could be said to him. Valentine was gloomy and reticent.

"Talk cannot do either you or me any good," he said, when the Colonel grasped his hand, and threatened to become effusive. "I am very sorry for you, and I have no doubt you are sorry for me. That is about all that can be said."

"But—but—I should like to know all that there is to be known about this infernal business. Poor, deluded girl! Surely you must have seen her danger, you must have had some cause for suspicion."

"I had none, or I should have looked after her better. I trusted her implicitly, and thought she was safe with her elder sister."

"Leo is a noble creature," said the Colonel, "but she is frivolous. She has been spoilt, Mr. Belfield. All beautiful women are spoilt, now-a-days. There is an open homage paid to beauty which must deteriorate character. I don't think you quite realized what a lovely woman you had married, and how inevitable it was she should have admirers."

"I thought my honour was safe in her keeping, Colonel Deverill. That was my only mistake."

"Have you heard of her since she left here?"

"Not a word."

"I telegraphed Leo to meet me at Waterloo this morning, and we had half-an-hour's talk before my train started. She thinks St. Austell is the man."

"I don't suppose anybody has any doubt about that."

"You will apply for a divorce, I suppose?"

"I suppose so, eventually."

He answered with a gloomy indifference which raised him in his father-in-law's estimation. He was evidently in no eager haste to shake off that dishonoured tie, to free himself for

second nuptials. He was not a pleasant young man, but in this matter he acted generously.

He showed Colonel Deverill Helen's unfinished letter, telling him how the housemaid had found it on the morning of her disappearance.

"Wretched girl, it was like her to leave an unfinished letter," said the Colonel, "and half an explanation. God help her with such a protector. If I had been more among beaten tracks on the Continent, I might have met them—or heard of them; but I was not often upon terra-firma after I left Marseilles."

Lady Belfield begged the Colonel to remain at the Abbey as long as he liked; and he accepted her hospitality for three days; during which time he tried to discover further particulars of his daughter's flight, but could hear very little, although he had several conversations with Mrs. Marrable, and more than one chat with the woman at the Lodge, whose husband was employed in the garden.

No one had heard her leave the house—of that Mrs. Marrable was certain.

No one at the Lodge had seen her go out of the gate; but there was a gate in the fence about half a mile from the Lodge, a gate which was sometimes locked and sometimes not, and she might have gone out that way. No such thing as a carriage had been seen waiting about upon the road near the park gate, either late in the evening of the 19th or in the early morning of the 20th.

This fact did not surprise the Colonel, as he had been shown the telegram purporting to be sent by Mr. Belfield, and no doubt despatched by some agent of St. Austell's. If Helen had known that such a summons was to arrive in order to facilitate her flight, she had lost her head at the crisis, and had anticipated the intended hour of departure. She must have walked all the way to the station in the early morning, before any one was about to notice her. Colonel Deverill was tempted to make further inquiries at the station, where a young and beautiful woman starting alone by an early train would most likely have attracted somebody's notice, even if she were not recognized as Mrs. Belfield of the Abbey; but he shrank from an investigation which would lay stress upon his daughter's infamy. What good would it be to him to learn the details of her flight? The evil was done; she was a disgraced and ruined woman; she had eloped with a notorious profligate, and a married man into the bargain, a man who would not be free to make her reparation were her own bonds broken to-morrow.

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders and gave up his daughter to perdition. He would have helped her if he could he would have taken her back to his heart as tenderly as the Vicar of

Wakefield received his deluded daughter, could he have found her in remorse and abandonment. He had been very fond of his children, after his own kind of fondness—as beautiful creatures flitting about his house and brightening it—but he could not move mountains. If his daughter had gone wrong, it was not within his power to bring her right again. He shed a few fatherly tears over her fall; but he was inclined to resent the perversity of Providence which had turned all things to evil in his younger child's destiny.

"She might have been mistress of this fine old place," he told himself, as he smoked his after-breakfast cigar in the cypress walk, "but she must needs throw herself at the head of the younger brother; and then she cannot keep her silly little head in the vortex of a London season, and elopes with the very worst man she could have chosen. She might have gone off with a Duke, by Jove, if she had liked—a Duke who could have made her a Duchess in good time—but she chooses St. Austell—St. Austell, whose property is mortgaged up to the hilt, and who has a wife he can't get rid of."

The case was hard, and the Colonel's spirits sank as he dwelt upon his daughter's fate. He was not a man to add to his affliction by taking to himself blame in the matter. He felt that Providence had dealt hardly with his daughter, that was all.

The Abbey was beautiful in itself and its surroundings, and life went as smoothly as upon velvet, administered by an admirable cook and irreproachable servants in every department, presided over by a woman who was still handsome and whom he had once adored, whom he might still adore had he been in his usual spirits. But the Colonel was weighed down by gloomy thoughts, and those picturesque gardens had a funereal air, and the cypress walk suggested a place of tombs. Even the babble of the river had lost its soothing power. The Colonel flung his half-smoked cigar into the stream with a groan, and stood idly watching the movements of a heron on the opposite bank, until it spread its wide grey wings, stretched its long neck, and skimmed away seaward. He was not interested in the bird, but watched its movements in a dull lassitude of mind and body.

He made up his mind to start for London next day, but before he went a morbid curiosity prompted him to ask Lady Belfield's permission to see his daughter's rooms—the rooms from which she had stolen away unseen by any one, like a thief in the night.

"I suppose they have not been much altered since she left," he said.

"No, there has been nothing changed. No one has occupied

the south wing since that sad day. I'll show you her room myself, if you like," replied Lady Belfield, feeling for him deeply in his affliction.

Mrs. Marrable brought the key of the outer door, which had been kept locked, and Lady Belfield and the Colonel went into the room together. There had been no changes made except the usual covering of furniture and pinning up of draperies which mark the careful housekeeper. On one side of the room stood two large basket trunks, covered with black leather, on which Helen's initials were painted in large white letters; a smaller box for bonnets, a travelling-desk, and a travelling-bag.

"Strange that she should not have taken some means to get these things sent after her," said the Colonel, contemplating the luggage.

"She has been afraid to ask for them, perhaps."

"Yes; that is it, no doubt. But it was rather a feeble proceeding to pack everything so carefully, and then to make no effort to get the things away. Poor Helen! It is so like her."

He took up the travelling-bag, which was large and heavy, made of crocodile leather, clamped with brass, and provided with all the latest improvements. He had reason to know the bag, for it was his own, and only, wedding gift to his daughter, and it was not yet paid for; he received dunning letters about it every three months, and he felt that there must eventually be a settlement somehow. And to think that she had left it behind her, not valuing it any more for all the trouble it had cost and was likely to cost him. He felt more injured at the thought of this ingratitude than if he had paid for the object with solid sovereigns.

He opened the bag, and looked dreamily at the silver-gilt stoppers, the ivory brushes and glove stretchers, and shining cutlery. All her little luxuries of the toilet had been packed in this receptacle. White rose and eau-de-cologne, lavande ambrée, attar of roses. A cloud of perfume came out of the bag as he opened it.

"There may be letters or papers of some kind that may help us to find out a little more about her plans," he said.

"Don't," pleaded Lady Belfield, stretching out her hand entreatingly, as if to stay the violation of a secret; "what good can it do to know any details? She is gone—we cannot hope to get her back yet awhile."

"My dear friend, it is my duty to know all I can," replied the Colonel sternly, and thereupon he proceeded to ransack the bag.

He turned out all the treasures, the bottles, and brushes, and thimble-cases, and brooches and bracelets in their morocco boxes,

treasures of ivory, of crystal and gold, of agate and silver. These he flung ruthlessly upon the dressing-table, and then with cruel hand he searched the silken pockets, until he found what he wanted, a letter, the last that St. Austell had written to her.

It had been written after their long talk by the river. It recapitulated his instructions as to her flight, explained the trick of the telegram which was to summon her to London in her husband's name, told her how he should be waiting for her on the up-platform—South-Western—at Exeter, advised her to take her luggage with her, and then after being strictly practical, the man of business vanished, and the passionate lover repeated his assurances of an undying love, a devotion which should know no change—urged her for his sake to be bold and firm, to fear nothing, think of no danger, remembering that in a few hours she would be safe in his arms.

"For God's sake, do not falter," he wrote. "I think I have proved myself worthy of your trusting love, by a devotion which has stood firm against every discouragement. You have given me your promise, my darling, the sacred pledge of responsive love. It would be as dishonourable as it would be cruel to break that promise, and to break my heart at the same time. I cannot live without you."

"I may as well keep that letter," said Colonel Deverill, when he had read it and given it to Lady Belfield to read after him. "There would be no good in showing it to Valentine."

"No, there would be no good. Pray keep it from him. There is nothing I dread so much as a meeting between him and Lord St. Austell."

"Oh, the days of duelling are past. There is nothing to be feared now-a-days, except the Divorce Court and the newspapers. Publicity is the fiery dragon that lies in wait for the sinner."

"With a man of my son's temperament, there is always reason for fear," said Lady Belfield gravely. "He has taken his trouble very quietly—too quietly, perhaps. I should fear the worst consequences if he were to meet Lord St. Austell."

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"I fancy you measure your son's feelings by an old-fashioned standard," he said. "The young men of the present day take all things lightly. A man gets rid of one wife and marries another within two or three seasons. The change is made so easily that one-half of Society knows nothing about it, and the other half takes no notice. If your son meant mischief he wouldn't be here hunting and shooting. He would be half-way to Ceylon in pursuit of his wife and her seducer. He would be hunting them, Lady Belfield, instead of Devonshire foxes."

Colonel Deverill left the Abbey in a very despondent state of mind.

"I am a broken man, my dear friend," he said. "I have been tottering for a good many years; low in health, in spirits, and in purse; but this last blow has annihilated me. Leonora is a splendid creature, but she is the essence of selfishness. She lives her own life, and cares about as much for her old father as she does for the gatekeeper in the Park. Helen was always fond of me. Her disgrace will bring my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. I don't feel as if I could ever hold my head up again among my old chums. I have boasted of that girl—I have been so proud of her. I shall go and hide myself at Kilrush. The cottagers and squireens will point the finger of scorn at me—but that won't count."

"You might almost as well stay in Devonshire as bury yourself at Kilrush," said Lady Belfield, pitying him in his desolation, feeling that she would like to comfort him if it were possible.

"Oh, but I have ties in Kilrush—ties of some kind. I have a stake in the country. The soil is mine, and though it pays me no rent it belongs to me. There is something in the sense of possession. Otherwise, for choice, I should infinitely prefer Chadford. There is a furnished cottage near the river which would suit me admirably."

"You mean the white cottage with a thatched roof and a verandah all round?"

"Yes, that is the place. Has it been long to let?"

"Only since June. It belongs to two maiden sisters. One of them was ordered to Germany for a rheumatic affection, and she and her sister went off last Midsummer, leaving their cottage in the hands of our local agent, who never has been known to find a tenant for anybody. The house is to be let for a twelvemonth, and for very little money. You had better take it, Colonel Deverill."

"My dear Lady Belfield, there is nothing I should like so much as to be near you, but you must consider that this neighbourhood would be full of painful associations for me, and that my presence would be full of painful associations for your son Valentine. Therefore, my best course is to bid you good-bye, and take my poor old bones off to Ireland."

CHAPTER XXXV.

CAPABLE OF STRANGE THINGS

Colonel Deverill's brief visit being ended, life at the Abbey resumed its old course, each of the brothers following his own particular bent; the elder secluded with his books, his organ and piano; the younger devoted to sport, and living for the most part out of doors. It seemed sometimes to Lady Belfield as if Valentine's married life had been an evil dream, which had vanished with the morning light: as if all things were again as they had been before the Deverills came to Morcomb. Yet this was but a momentary feeling, for although all the details of her daily life with her two sons were almost exactly as they had been, there was a change in the spirit of her life, a change which involved all the difference between happiness and unhappiness. The brothers were not the same as they had been in their mutual relations. There was something wanting, as if some subtle mystic link had snapped and left them wide asunder. They never quarrelled. There was no sign of angry feeling between them; yet to Lady Belfield it seemed that brotherly love was dead. Adrian was especially forbearing to Valentine; never did anything to provoke him, or resented any rudeness of his brother's; but there were no signs of that affectionate sympathy which had once been so sweet to the mother's eyes. She never saw her sons linked arm in arm, strolling up and down the lawn in front of her windows. She never saw Valentine lolling in at the library window to talk to Adrian, trying to tempt him away from his books, as she had been used to see him almost daily in the time that was past. There was a change in the spirit of both brothers, as if both were haunted by the memory of an unspeakable misery. A woman had come into their lives and poisoned all things for them. A woman's fickle love had blighted them both.

Never since that first evening of his return had Valentine spoken of his wife. For the first few weeks he had put on a spurious gaiety, had tried to convince everybody that he was in excellent spirits, and unaffected by his loss. The men who met him out hunting—men who had known him from his boyhood—found these forced spirits painfully oppressive. Then there came a gradual change, the forced hilarity died away, and was followed by a settled gloom. He hunted three times a week, and shot over the Abbey preserves; but he went nowhere, and refused all invitations from old friends and acquaintances in the

county. He refused an invitation to spend a week at Wilmington, where pheasants were more abundant than anywhere else within a hundred miles.

The Miss Toffstaffs were indignant at such folly.

"Why doesn't he divorce his runaway wife and have done with it?" exclaimed Dorothy. "It is absurd that he should make so much more fuss than other men. And his brother is just as bad. Mother has asked him to dine and sleep three times since last August, and he has made an excuse for refusing each time. They are a couple of savages."

"Sir Adrian has been nowhere since his sister-in-law's escapade," said her sister. "I suppose he never got over his attachment to her, though she jilted him so shamefully."

Everybody in the neighbourhood was outraged at Sir Adrian's secluded life. Since that awful night he had isolated himself so far as it was possible from his fellow-men. He would hold no converse with men whose consciences were clear. It seemed to him that his knowledge of crime—his guilty reticence—made him a creature apart. He would not mix in society under false pretences. He would not give his friends the power to say by-and-by, should this dark secret be brought to light, "He had no right to come among us—to touch our hands and sit beside our hearths—knowing what he knew."

Again, he would not make the distinction between his brother and himself more marked than it need be. Valentine held himself aloof from every one, and darkened no man's threshold. Valentine's brother accepted the same isolation; with a single exception, and that was in favour of Mr. Rockstone.

The Vicar was his chosen friend. He never shrank from crossing the Vicar's threshold, knowing that in that house, had he dared to unbosom himself, he would have found sympathy and promise of pardon. He had often longed to unburden himself of that dreadful secret, to confess all, knowing that his secret would be safe in priestly keeping; but although there would have been infinite comfort in such confidence, he felt that his duty towards Valentine constrained him to silence. It was not of himself, or of his own feelings, that he had to think, but of the criminal who had put himself in peril of the law's last penalty.

Seeing her two sons bent on isolation, Lady Belfield withdrew from society as much as she could without giving offence to her neighbours.

She still kept up her old intimacy with Mrs. Freemantle, and worked with her among the poor of Chadford parish, which was a large one. She received all callers with her accustomed cordiality, and afternoon tea in the Abbey drawing-room or in the Abbey grounds was as pleasant as of old. But there

were no more dinner parties, and Lady Belfield declined all invitations.

"I am getting an old woman," she told her friends in confidence. "This sad trouble of my son's has aged me by ten years, and I feel that the fireside is the best place for me now."

At which a chorus of matrons and maidens protested. "*Dear* Lady Belfield, how *can* you say such a thing?"

It was the season of snipe and waterfowl once again, a wintry season, a time of grey, rainy days, varied by light frosts, and Valentine Belfield was spending a good many hours of his life upon the river or on the marshes, with his gun and a couple of spaniels. The low level marshland and the grey autumnal mist suited his humour better than a fairer landscape or a summer sky. He pushed his boat along the stream, or waded across the marsh, in a dull vacuity of mind, thinking of nothing, caring for nothing, except just to keep moving about in the open air. All keen delight in sport had departed from him. He only pursued it because it was necessary to him to be up and doing. He was sorry that he was not a soldier, obliged to obey orders, to make forced marches under a tropical sky. Sometimes he even thought of running away and enlisting in a regiment that was under orders for active service. Sometimes he thought of going out to Australia and digging for gold, or to the Cape to dig for diamonds. There would be excitement in such a life as that, he thought; excitement which would help a man to forget.

He would have carried out one of these plans, perhaps, since he loathed the dull quiet of his present existence, but for one restraining influence. He dared not go far from the spot where his secret lay hidden. He dared not leave the neighbourhood of that silent pool under the rushes, where his murdered wife was lying. He had an idea that were he to leave the Abbey the body would be discovered the next day. During the brief interval after the murder, in which he had been absent from the Abbey, he had suffered an agony of apprehension. To leave the spot again would be madness.

He had passed the basket-maker's cottage a dozen times, sometimes drifting slowly by in his boat, sometimes passing it on foot by the causeway. The place looked just the same as of old, except that no woman's figure appeared at the door. There was no smoke from the chimney, no sign of life. Old John was trudging about with his baskets, no doubt.

Having passed so often, and seen no change in the aspect of the place, Valentine got out of the way of looking at it as he rowed by, and forgot his old interest in the poor, tumble-down cottage; but one November afternoon, while he was rowing slowly by, one of the spaniels gave a short, sharp bark, and an instant after he heard the shutting of a door.

"There's some one there," he thought; "old John, most likely. I may hear something of that Jezebel."

He moved his boat to the causeway, sprang on shore, and went to the cottage. He opened the door, and found himself face to face with Jezebel herself.

Altered since she left Belfield Abbey: altered for the worse or the better? He could scarce decide which, as he looked at her with rapid scrutiny.

She looked considerably older than when he had seen her last, in her housemaid's livery, the coquettish mob-cap, red gown, and muslin apron. She wore a cap to-day, but a cap of a peculiar pattern, pinched and plain, made of lawn, Quakerish, puritanical. She wore a black gown, with a long straight skirt.

"So you have come back, Mistress Madge," he said. "Are you living here?"

"No, Mr. Belfield. I am only here for two or three days, to look after my old grandfather."

"You are a very nice person. I am indebted to you for some of the happiness—and most of the misery of my life," said Valentine, flinging himself upon the bench beside the door, the bench upon which he had sat years ago, when he was in love with this girl. "Your anonymous letter brought things to a crisis."

"I am not sorry I wrote it," said Madge, with a proud carelessness. "I was tired of seeing your underhand conduct. I wanted Sir Adrian to know what his sweetheart and his brother were worth."

"You mean that you were consumed by jealousy, and you wanted to do all the harm you could," retorted Valentine.

"You may say that of me if you like. I shall not try to convince you differently."

"Oh, you are monstrous proud and prim! You have turned hypocrite, and are full of pious cant, I have no doubt. You belong to some sisterhood, I suppose?"

"More than that, I have founded a sisterhood."

"Indeed."

"Yes. I and a handful of women like myself—there are just twenty-two of us now—have established ourselves as nursing sisters among the fallen and the unhappy, among broken-hearted women. We seek out those cases of abject misery which seem to lie outside the limit of ordinary help."

"What do you call yourselves?"

"Sisters of the Forlorn Hope. We have a house in a poor neighbourhood, which is called the Forlorn Hope, and which we use as a refuge for unhappy creatures who have no other shelter. It is small, but we hope to make it larger."

"Of course, and you spend your lives in begging for funds, I suppose."

"We are not ashamed to beg; and we find that people are very kind to us. Half our funds have been gathered among working people who can ill afford the pence they give us, but the good has been done all the same."

"And your fallen women?" asked Valentine, with his cynical air. "Are they pleasant patients?"

"Not always; but they are rarely ungrateful."

"And when they are well—they go out into the world and forget all you have done for them, I suppose?"

"Not always. There are some who remember us, and who help us, with their small means and large hearts."

"And you really believe you have made conversions—that some of your fallen women have walked straight after your administrations?"

"Yes, we know of some who have tried to lead better lives; but most of those for whom we have cared were marked for death before we found them. We have been able to smooth their last hours. That is at least something."

"May I ask what it was that inspired you with the idea of this mission?" asked Valentine, looking at her wonderingly.

She was completely in earnest; she had that grandly resolute air which he remembered of old—an air that made him feel a shallow trifler in her presence.

"I was with my mother all through her last long illness and till her death," she said. "When she was gone, I made up my mind to devote myself to—such death-beds, for love of her."

"She had not been such a very good mother that you should devote your life to her memory," sneered Valentine.

"She loved me very dearly—at the last," replied Madge sorrowfully.

She stood leaning against the doorpost, in her straight black gown and Puritan cap, while he sat on the bench and lighted his cigar, just as in the old days when he was her lover. But there was no talk of love between them now. A shadow of seriousness rested upon both. In her it was thoughtfulness; in him it was impenetrable gloom.

"The Forlorn Hope," he said. "A queer name for a house. I rather like it though, because it is queer. Was the name your fancy?"

"Yes."

"And you take in fallen women, and nurse them in their last illnesses, and make believe that they are not altogether worthless?"

"They are not worthless—they are those over whom the angels rejoice—they are those who have been lost and are found."

"Ah!" he said listlessly, "you believe in all that. You believe in repentance and the washing of sins. 'Though your

sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow.' I remember hearing that sentence read in church when I was a child. I think the idea of vivid colour in it must have caught my fancy —though they are as scarlet—scarlet—the colour of blood—and of sin—they shall be white—white—white——"

The words dropped slowly from his lips, with a pause after each, dying into silence, as he sat with his head bent, and his eyes upon the ground.

"The Forlorn Hope," he repeated by-and-by, still looking at the ground. "I like the name. Where is your house?"

"In Lisson Grove. I don't suppose you know anything of the neighbourhood."

"Not much; but I have a vague idea of its whereabouts. The Forlorn Hope. Would you take a fallen man if he came to you marked for death? Or do you care only for your own sex?"

"It is for our own sex we have pledged ourselves to work," answered Madge.

"But you would not shut your door against a penitent sinner?"

"I think not—if he were utterly helpless except for us, and we had any power to help him."

"And your mission is to smooth the pillow of death, and to make the end easy for those who have lived hard and have rioted in sin. Well, I dare say it is a good mission. You are a strange girl, and seem capable of strange things."

He looked at her thoughtfully, admiringly even, but with a grave and respectful admiration which was very different from the young man's sensuous worship of beauty. It was not a lover's gaze which rested on the pale face to-day.

She had aged and altered from the glowing gipsy-like beauty which he had admired in his bachelor days; but she was handsome still, and, while her face had lost in richness of colouring, it had gained in distinction. The lines of the features were more delicate, the ivory tints of the complexion had a more spiritual beauty than the warm carnations of girlhood. She was thinner than she had been then, and looked taller. The straight, tall figure in the straight black gown, the noble head in the Quaker cap, had a grand simplicity which Valentine admired with almost reverent admiration, he in whom reverence for anything was so rare a feeling.

He sat silent, his cigar extinguished, his eyes brooding on the ground again, as he recalled a past which seemed ages away, and the day when he had fancied himself desperately in love with this woman.

He had wooed her passionately, and had tried to win her, yet had wondered at her folly with a contemptuous wonder, when she told him she must be his wife or nothing. He had laughed

within himself at the idea that he could be thought capable of marrying a basket-maker's granddaughter, a half-bred gipsy.

He had chosen a mate of his own rank, thoroughbred like himself, penniless as the basket-maker's granddaughter, but a lady by birth and want of education. The girl taught in the National School could have beaten the Colonel's daughter upon any subject on which they could have been examined, from the multiplication table to Early English literature.

And now he asked himself what his life might have been like had he flung conventionality to the winds, made light of caste, and married Mrs. Mandeville's daughter? Would things have gone as badly with him? Would he have been as careless of her as he had been of Helen, and would some other man have found out that she was fair, and tempted her away from him? Would any man have dared to tempt this woman? Would any fashionable sybarite have ventured to approach this Egyptian sphinx, in silken dalliance, with the light airy courtesies which smooth the brimstone path of seduction? Looking at that grand face, those dark, deep eyes, with their steady outlook, it seemed to him that this woman, once having taken upon herself the vows of a wife, would have kept them until death. It seemed to him, also, that no man who was her husband would have dared to trifle with her happiness.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"WOULD SHE HAVE TOUCHED MY HAND?"

VALENTINE BELFIELD went back to the marsh next day with his gun and his dogs, shot a brace of birds, and then made his way to the basket-maker's cottage. He was drawn there irresistibly. He wanted to see that earnest face again, to hear those low and steady accents, which fell upon his ear and brain with a soothing influence, like organ music stealing along a vaulted roof to the homeless wanderer lingering by a cathedral door.

There had been more comfort to him in yesterday's conversation with Madge than in anything that had happened to him since the doing of that deed which separated him for ever from his fellow-men. He found himself wondering what would happen if he were to tell her of his crime—if he were to unburden his overloaded breast to this woman whom he had once loved with a selfish sensual love, but whom he now reverenced as a creature

of superior mould. He knew not how the change had come about. It might be the consciousness of his own guilt, which intensified his sense of her superiority. Three years ago he had laughed at her pretension to equality as woman against man: and now he longed to hide his weary head in her lap, and to pour out the dark story of his crime. He wanted her compassion, her help against the evil spirit that was rending him.

"If it is her mission to rescue the fallen, she ought to care for me," he thought. "None ever fell lower—none was ever deeper dyed with the stains of sin!"

The door of old Dawley's cottage was shut, and it was the basket-maker himself who appeared at Valentine's knock.

"How d'ye do, Dawley?" said Valentine. "I have been shooting about here, and I thought I'd look in upon you. The rheumatism is better, I hope."

"Well, no, sir; that complaint ain't like good wine. It don't improve with age," answered the old man, not altogether unsuspicious. "Did her ladyship send any message for me or my daughter?"

"No; my mother did not know that I was coming this way. I was surprised to see your daughter here yesterday. She left the Abbey very abruptly three years ago, and I don't think any of our people had heard of her since."

"I beg your pardon, sir, I think Mrs. Marrable had. I believe my girl wrote to her—after her mother's death," answered Dawley, placing a chair for his visitor, and resuming his own seat beside the fire. "I know she must have seemed ungrateful for cutting off from such a good place, and a place in which she had been so kindly treated, without giving proper warning. But she's a strange girl, Mr. Belfield, is my granddaughter, and she thought she had a mission in life, and that that mission was to look after her poor sinful mother; and look after her mother she did, and brought her out of a burning fiery furnace, and cared for her, and worked for her, and nursed her to the end, and buried her—all with the price of her own labour. She worked like a galley-slave, did that girl of mine. And she did what she wanted to do, and what she thought her duty: which is a good deal more than most of us do."

"Has your daughter been dead long?"

"Nearly two years. She was in a decline when Madge found her. She'd lived like a lady, and drove her own carriage," said the old man, with a touch of pride, "though she'd had her ups and downs."

"I saw her in London four or five years ago," said Valentine, "the remains of a splendid woman."

"She'd spent more money in her time than many a lady born and bred," pursued Dawley, waxing prouder, "and she died a

penitent woman, and has gone to glory," he concluded, with pious unction.

"Is this the first time your granddaughter has been to see you since she left the Abbey?"

"No, she came once before. She came to tell me of her mother's death. I wanted her to stop with me altogether then—or to go back to the Abbey, if her ladyship would forgive her and take her back—but she had set her heart upon what she calls her mission, and off she goes again. She's a good girl to me, all the same. She writes to me once a month, and she sends me a little money now and again. She's gone to see Mr. Rockstone this afternoon, and she's going back to London to-morrow."

"How does she get money to carry on her work in London?"

"All manner of ways. Sometimes by begging, sometimes by the sweat of her brow. She goes out nursing now and again, among people who can afford to pay her handsomely for her services. She learnt how to nurse consumptive patients in attending upon her mother. She had a long lingering illness, had my girl—died by inches, as the saying is—and Madge nursed her through it all. There was a famous doctor that had known something of my girl when she was in her prime, and the tip-top of fashion—and he attended her in her illness, and was kind and generous to her, so that she never wanted for anything. And he took to Madge, and told her she had a genius for nursing—and it was he who recommended her afterwards to his rich patients, and set her going as a sick nurse."

"And in her leisure hours she has founded a sisterhood?" interrogated Valentine.

"Yes—and the other sisters are all ladies—ladies born and bred. There's been some kind of blight upon 'em, one and all—disappointments in their love affairs—or the loss of a relation—or a bad husband. They've all of 'em had their own sorrows before they began to think of other people's troubles. Some of 'em have a little bit of money—some haven't a sixpence—but they all work alike, and most of their money goes to help the poor wretched creatures they take, sick or dying, off the cruel streets of London. It's a good bit of work, Mr. Belfield, for a young woman like my Madge to have done in less than two years."

"Yes, it is a good work—and your granddaughter is a wonderful woman," said Valentine musingly.

He remembered how lightly he had thought of this girl three years ago, and with what an insolent sense of his own superiority he had approached her, deeming her his predestined prey. And now he knew that she was, and had always been, infinitely his superior.

He propitiated old Dawley with a gift of money for future

tobacco, and a small supply of his own tobacco for immediate use; and then he took up his hat and prepared to go back to his boat and his dogs.

"Will you ask Madge to go and see my mother?" he said. "I think Lady Belfield would like to hear about her work in Lisson Grove. Ask her to go to tea at the Abbey to-morrow. I'll tell my mother to expect her."

"You are very good, sir; but I believe my gal has made up her mind to go back to London by an early train to-morrow."

"But a day won't make much difference. Ask her to put off her journey for a day or two. I know my mother would like to see her."

It was his own idea, and he had hardly thought of his mother's mind in the matter. He was feverishly eager that Madge should be encouraged and helped in her work.

He rowed slowly homeward along the broad river, keeping close in to the shore. About half a mile from Dawley's cottage he saw the woman whose image filled his mind—a tall figure in a straight black gown, moving with steady pace along the dusty tow-path. He pulled in to the bank, grounded his boat, and stepped on shore.

"I have just left your grandfather, Madge," he said. "He has told me all about you." And then he urged her to go to his mother on the following afternoon.

"She will be interested in your work, and she will give you some money," he said. And then he turned out one of his pockets and gave her a little heap of gold and silver, amounting to between six and seven pounds.

"It is not much," he said, "but it is all I have left of this year's income. No; don't refuse it," as she made a gesture of repudiation: "I have no need for money in this place. Don't refuse it unless you want to wound me."

"Why should I want to wound you?"

"Ah, why indeed! I once behaved like a cad to you; but I am not the same man as I was then. I may be a worse man, perhaps—but anyhow, I am different. I shall never insult you again, Madge."

"I am sure you will not," she said, looking at him with a compassionate gaze.

She had heard the Chadford people talk of his wife's elopement, and she had been told that Valentine Belfield was a broken man, so altered that his closest friends of the past felt as if he were a stranger among them. She was sorry for him, and felt herself in some measure responsible for his misery, since it was her anonymous warning which had precipitated his marriage with Helen Deverill.

She took his gift for the Forlorn Hope, and promised to go to the Abbey next day.

"I have been with Mr. Rockstone this afternoon," she said. "He has given me seventeen pounds. Ten pounds are his own gift, and the rest he has collected among his friends. I must hurry back to grandfather now, sir," she concluded. "I have so little time to spend with him. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Madge."

He held out his hand, and she took it in frank friendliness. His clasp was strong and fervent, and he sighed as he released her hand, and then walked on in silence.

"Would she have touched my hand if she knew all?" he asked himself, as he went back to his boat.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

COLONEL DEVERILL HAS HOPES

Colonel Deverill loitered in London for a week or so after he left the Abbey. He put up at a sporting club in Piccadilly, where there were rooms for birds of passage, and he spent his life in a variety of smoking-rooms and billiard-rooms, card-rooms and reading-rooms. He was a member of seven West End clubs, and had a choice of places in which to smoke and saunter. But the clubs were nearly empty at this time of the year, and the few men whom he knew were coming and going—full of their autumnal engagements, unsettled and distracted: not in a frame of mind to be good company for a solitary wanderer like the Colonel, who had made no plans for autumn or winter, and who was beginning to feel old and desolate.

The men he knew were civil, and some of them had a sympathetic air, which implied compassion for him in his affliction as a father; but he felt a sting even in sympathy, and dreaded lest some officious friend should offer to condole with him. He wondered whether his daughter's flight had become town-talk. There had been no stir made—no row or open scandal—and it was possible her disgrace was only guessed at by the few who were behind the scenes of Society. There was one man, however, Sir Randal Greswold, of the County Clare Rangers, with whom Colonel Deverill was on terms of almost brotherly confidence, and from him he withheld nothing.

"Have you heard anything about that scoundrel, St. Austell?"

he asked. "Do people know that he has gone off with my daughter?"

"Upon my word, Deverill, I don't think anybody knows as much as that, but I believe there's a general idea that Mrs. Belfield has gone wrong somehow. One never can tell how these things get known. They seem to be in the air. St. Austell was always about with her, you see. There was no mistaking the nature of his attentions. The fellow is all the more dangerous, because there is a vein of sincerity in him; he is desperately in earnest for the time being. People saw that he was over head and ears in love with your daughter; and when he sold his share in the racing stable and announced his intention of going to Ceylon, every one knew what it meant. He was going off with Mrs. Belfield."

"Do you know if—if any one has seen them together?" faltered the Colonel.

"He was seen in Paris—with a lady; he was heard of at Genoa—with a lady; and he was heard of again at Venice—with a lady—only a week ago."

"I have a good mind to go after them, and try to bring her back with me," said Colonel Deverill.

"Don't attempt it, my dear fellow. A father's influence and a father's authority go for nothing against an infatuation of that kind. A little later perhaps, when they are both tired of each other, you may do something, but not now. Besides, they would be on board a P. and O. before you could get to Venice, or they would be hiding somewhere in the Apennines or the Austrian Tyrol."

The Colonel felt the wisdom of this advice. He was not the kind of man to wander all over Europe in search of an erring daughter; though he was assuredly the kind of man to shoot his daughter's seducer, could they two be brought face to face without too much trouble on the Colonel's part. *Laissez faire* had been the rule of his existence. It had left him in very low water in this latter stage of life; but he did not murmur against fate. This last blow hit him harder than any loss of fortune. He went to Wilkie Mansions in search of sympathy from his elder daughter; but Mrs. Baddeley was at Ostend with some friends who had a big yacht—a certain Mr. and Mrs. Digby Smithers, Stock Exchange people, newly rich, and very glad to cultivate the friendship of a lady who went everywhere, or nearly everywhere, and who knew nearly everybody. That there were some people whom Mrs. Baddeley had never succeeded in knowing gave her just that touch of poor humanity which brought her in sympathy with Mrs. Digby Smithers, who found it hard work to force her way in society, even by the aid of Gunter and Dan Godfrey. Under these circumstances,

Mrs. Digby Smithers' houses in Eaton Place and at Marlow, and Mr. Digby Smithers' yacht, the *Clotho*, were very much at Mrs. Baddeley's service, and still more at the service of Mrs. Baddeley's fashionable friends.

"Ask as many nice fellows as you like," said Smithers. "There are eight good cabins in the *Clotho*, and she's pretty well found, as I think you know."

"The *Clotho* is fairyland," cried Leo gaily. "The *Clotho* ought to be called Fortunatus or the Wishing Cap. One has only to ask and to have. When I had one of my bad headaches the other day, and Mrs. Digby Smithers wrung from me that there was only one brand of champagne that ever did my headaches the least good, there was a bottle of that very brand open beside my berth in two minutes. The *Clotho* is a yacht of miracles. If it were only big enough to carry a roc's egg, I should not scruple to ask for one. I know it would be there. Perhaps you have some patent compressible rocs' eggs in the hold at this very moment."

Digby Smithers laughed. He liked Mrs. Baddeley to chaff him about his yacht, though he did not always follow her meaning. He was not a man of profound reading. He had, in fact, never read anything except the newspapers, and there his studies were confined to such information as affected his own interests. For thirty years of his life—from seventeen to forty-seven—he had given himself up to the business of money-making: and now at forty-seven he had at last brought himself to believe that he had made enough money and could afford to spend some. Hitherto his wife and he had been content to live their jogtrot lives in Bloomsbury, at an expenditure of seven hundred a year, taking their chief pleasure from the knowledge that they were putting a good many thousands behind them as they jogged along; but at last the time had come when Mrs. Smithers, childless, and seeing her charms on the wane, told herself, and told her husband, that it was now or never. If they were ever to see life and enjoy the fruits of prosperity, there was not an hour to lose.

Urged by his wife, therefore, Mr. Smithers assumed the prenomen Digby, bestowed on him in baptism by an impecunious half-pay captain, with whom Smithers the elder had claimed cousinship. With an almost feverish haste he exchanged Bloomsbury for Eaton Place, and the solid upholstery of Finsbury Pavement for the artistic cabinet work and high art fabrics of Druce. He bought a river-side villa at Marlow, and a steam-launch, which speedily became a horror to rowing men; but Mrs. Smithers, who hankered for a life of excitement, found the steam-launch dull, and insisted upon a yacht.

Mrs. Baddeley had made this worthy couple's acquaintance

at Marlow, where their villa was used as a water-side hotel by a somewhat rowdy social circle, and where the luncheon table was openly talked of as the table d'hôte. Leo and her chosen friends used the table d'hôte freely, made undisguised fun of the Smitherses, and found fault with their cook; but anything had been forgiven in a lady who had two or three tame noblemen in her train, first among all, Lord St. Austell, whose reputation as a man of fashion seemed all the better because of its savour of iniquity. No virtuous nobleman had ever achieved such world-wide renown as the erring St. Austell.

Colonel Deverill went over to Ostend, to confer with his elder daughter, and was received on board the *Clotho* with oppressive cordiality.

"You will stay, of course, Colonel," said Digby Smithers, who was a short stout man, pink of complexion, and sandy of hair; "you shall have one of our best cabins—the one we saved for St. Austell. He promised us a week in September, but those troublesome doctors have sent him off to the East."

The Colonel spent a couple of nights on board, in the cabin that was to have been St. Austell's. He only stayed those two nights in order to have a quiet talk with his daughter.

Mrs. Baddeley was looking ill, and was obviously out of spirits, though she put on an air of forced gaiety now and then out of compliment to her hostess. Even Tory's blandishments seemed to have lost their charm, and she allowed that sagacious animal's somewhat fickle fancy to be won by Mrs. Digby Smithers, who had conceived an ardent affection for him, and who ministered to his appetite with a reckless disregard of consequences.

"You look dreadfully cut up, Leo," said her father, when they were sitting together under an awning, at a comfortable distance from Mrs. Digby Smithers and a brace of frisky matrons, all absorbed by the fascinations of Tory, and all diversifying the inanity of their conversation by still more inane gigglings.

"I am dreadfully cut up," she answered curtly.

"Well, I don't wonder at it. The girl was in your charge, and you must have felt responsible for her in some measure. I suppose there's no doubt she went off with St. Austell—and not with any other man?"

"Doubt? If you had seen them together, you would not ask such a question."

"But if you saw how things were tending, why didn't you stop her—you are ever so much older—and a woman of experience?"

"Stop her! Could you stop the Ganges? She went headlong to destruction from the hour he began to care for her. You don't

know what he is when he pretends to be in love with a woman! God knows what he is when he is really in love: and I suppose he was really in love with Helen."

The Colonel listened with a thoughtful brow.

"It's a bad business," he said, "and I don't see any remedy for it. If he were only free—but I suppose there is no hope that his wife will take it into her head to divorce him——"

"She can't do it, if she would. Her own position won't bear scrutiny. He might have divorced her five years ago if he had chosen: but he didn't choose. There were money interests at stake; and I think he preferred his own position, as a married man without the incumbrance of a wife, to absolute freedom. He might trifle with any woman's affections and not fear to be called to account, don't you know? And to an unprincipled man the position has its advantages."

"I wish he had been free to make your sister an honest woman," said the Colonel gloomily.

"You mean free to make her Lady St. Austell," sneered Leo. "If she had run away with a Jones or a Smith, you would not care half so much about her honesty. I know your Irish pride."

"Can I help having kings for my ancestors? A feeling of that kind is in a man's blood. Do you know where Lady St. Austell is and what she is doing?"

"She is at Naples, I believe—she has a villa somewhere in the suburbs, and lives in a certain style. She has a rich Italian Marquis for her banker, and is said to spend money rather recklessly. I am told she takes chloral; so there might be a chance for Helen, if St. Austell doesn't get tired of her too soon."

"How heartlessly you talk of your sister."

"She has ceased to be my sister. I have done with her for ever."

"One would think you had been in love with St. Austell, or you would hardly be so bitter."

"Suppose I was in love with him! At any rate, I did not compromise myself on his account. Why could not Helen take care of herself as I have done? Could she not like a man—without throwing herself into his arms?"

"She was less a woman of the world than you, Leonora. It is not every woman who can take care of herself as you have done, and yet amuse herself as you do."

A month later, Colonel Deverill opened his *Times*, on board his Scotch friends' yacht in the Orkneys, and started at seeing a line in large type, among the telegraphic news: "Cholera at Naples. Seventeen deaths."

"By Jove!" muttered the Colonel, with a thrill of guilty hope, "Lady St. Austell will have to cut and run from her Neapolitan villa."

Would she cut and run? Hardly, unless she were a very foolish woman. Dire diseases which ravage the slums and cellars of a city, the lanes and alleys and crowded quarters where the poor congregate, are rarely known to visit suburban villas perched high on the crest of a flower-scented hill, with their backs to the orange groves and their faces to the sea. No cholera poison would pollute the air that blew in at Lady St. Austell's windows. She would be safe enough.

Notwithstanding this opinion that no harm could possibly come to Lady St. Austell, Colonel Deverill read the cholera column with a keener interest than other parts of the paper, and had a particularly sharp eye for news from Naples. Cholera was reported all through Southern Italy, as well as at Toulon and Marseilles; and every day showed a new list of victims. All the English visitors were leaving Naples and its vicinity.

At last appeared the name for which Colonel Deverill was on the watch.

"Lady St. Austell has left her villa at Posilipo for the island of Capri, where she will be the guest of the Marchese Lugarno di Melina, whose picturesque château and orange groves are known to Italian tourists. No case of cholera has been heard of on the island."

"So she has cut and run, after all," said the Colonel. "What nervous fools some women are! And yet they are of the same clay as Florence Nightingale and her sisterhood."

After this the Colonel glanced at the cholera news with a careless eye. The one woman, whose death might have seemed a special favour of Providence, was out of reach of infection—safe on her sea-girt isle.

Colonel Deverill unfolded his *Galignani* one wintry morning in Paris, some weeks after he had forgotten all about Naples and the cholera, and this time he was startled much more seriously than by the Neapolitan news of September.

"We regret to announce the death of Lady St. Austell, who expired at Les Orangers, Capri, after a long illness. Her ladyship was among the English residents who fled from Naples at the first outbreak of cholera; and, from the time of her flight, she had been suffering from a nervous fever, which ended fatally on Saturday morning. Lady St. Austell was the seventh daughter of the Earl of Swathling."

"Gone!" cried the Colonel. "Then there will be a chance for my girl, after all."

To raise his daughter from disgrace and seclusion to a better place in the world than that which she had occupied before her fall was the strongest desire of Colonel Deverill's mind. He hardly stopped to ask himself whether society would accept such a marriage as a rehabilitation; whether the world would

ever consent to condone the past; whether the divorced Mrs. Belfield would be forgotten in the second Lady St. Austell. The one point in his mind was that reparation could now be made to his daughter, and that it was his business to bring her seducer to book.

The first thing to be managed, however, would be the divorce; and that must needs be a work of time and of unpleasantness. It must be brought about with the least possible publicity, and it would be the Colonel's duty to use all the influence he could command, in order to shorten those loathsome reports which are sport to the newspaper reader, and death to those whose names figure therein. Colonel Deverill had been daily expecting to hear that his son-in-law had petitioned for a divorce; but he had as yet received no notice to that effect. The young man was evidently in no haste to free himself; but now he would have to be gently stimulated to the effort. With a man of St. Austell's temperament there was no time to be lost. He must not be allowed to tire of his latest victim before he was free to espouse her.

He felt that the matter was one in which he could not afford to be precipitate. He must approach the question delicately, in the character of a disinterested friend and broken-hearted father. With this view, he wrote to Lady Belfield, asking her to hire the furnished cottage on the bank of the Chad for him, if it were still in the market.

"I am tired of Paris, and I don't care for another winter on the Riviera," he wrote. "I spent two seasons at Nice with my girls, when life was brighter with me than it is now. Those scenes would only awaken painful associations. Your Devonshire climate is mild enough for a tough old soldier like me—so if you can get the cottage for me on reasonable terms I will engage it for six months, and telegraph to my butler and his wife to take possession."

Lady Belfield replied by telegram. "Cottage taken. Feel sure you will approve terms."

"Admirable woman," replied the Colonel; "as business-like as she is charming. If my poor girl had married the right brother instead of the wrong one, how happy we might have been."

He made all his arrangements, and was established in Myrtle Cottage within ten days of that announcement in *Galignani*. The slovenly old Irish butler and the slammerkin Irish housekeeper had the art of making their master comfortable. A red-elbowed drudge, hired in the neighbourhood, and a boy to clean boots, run errands, and work in the garden, completed the household, and the Colonel was more carefully ministered to than many a man with thirty or forty servants.

The cottage was picturesque without being damp—an admirable quality in cottages. It stood well above the river, with about an acre of garden sprawling in an irregular figure on the hill-side—good old garden ground, teeming with old-fashioned perennials, and rich in old-fashioned shrubs, guelder roses, golden broom, arbutus, lilac, and laburnum. The rooms were small, cosy—furnished with substantial furniture of the Reform Bill era—clumsy, ponderous, comfortable. Lady Belfield had taken a basket of hot-house flowers to fill all the bowls and vases, had seen cheery wood fires lighted in all the rooms, and had spread new magazines and periodicals on a table in the drawing-room, so that the Colonel's first exclamation on entering the room was: "This looks like home."

There was a note from Lady Belfield on the chimney-piece, asking him to dinner that evening, which he hastened to accept by means of a hurried scrawl and the handy boy. There was no one at the Abbey but the family, and the dinner was not lively, although Constance Belfield did all in her power to maintain the interest of the conversation. There was a dogged gloom in Valentine's manner which repelled confidence, and there was a subdued melancholy upon Adrian's countenance, which was only brightened when he addressed his mother.

"Val has had one of his long days with the foxhounds," said Lady Belfield apologetically, "so you must not take any notice of him if he is dull."

Colonel Deverill was bent upon conciliating his son-in-law, and was careful to talk of the things Valentine loved. They played a couple of games at billiards after dinner, and talked of the hunting. Valentine was gloomy, but not ill-natured.

"If you care about hunting, we can mount you for two days a week all through the season," he said. "There are plenty of good hunters. My mother has been very generous to me lately, and we have increased the stud. It is the only thing a man can do in this gloomy hole."

"You find Chadford gloomy."

"I always did. I have tolerated the place because it is my home—it has been needs must, don't you know?—but I believe I have always hated it. I'm very sure I hate it now."

This seemed natural in a man who had been badly treated. The Colonel paused upon his stroke to sigh, and then made his cannon neatly, with a subdued air.

"You have had reason to dislike the place—lately," he said despondently, and then he dawdled for a little, as he chalked his cue, trying to find the best words in which to approach a risky subject. "You—you have not petitioned for your divorce yet, I suppose."

He said *your* divorce, making the matter, as it were, a foregone conclusion, and in his son-in-law's especial interest.

"I am not going to petition," answered Valentine.

The Colonel tried an impossible cannon off the red in sheer confusion of mind.

"Not going to petition!" he faltered.

"No. Why should I? I don't want to marry again—I never should marry again—whatever might occur. I have made one mistake, and I had rather abide by it."

"My dear Valentine, that is one way of looking at the matter. Forgive me if I say it's not the right way."

"Where's the wrong?"

"To yourself first—to my wretched daughter in the second place. You don't want to marry again you say—of course you don't—not now. Your wound is too raw yet; every touch is agony. Wait till your wound is healed, my dear boy—and fancy yourself then thrown into the society of a pretty and sympathetic woman—who pities you, and is quite ready to give you a happier experience of married life. Get your divorce, and you may let the coming years do what they like for you—find you a wife or not, as Heaven may order. But keep yourself bound to a woman who has been false to you, and you shut yourself out from all hope of future consolation."

"I am not the kind of man to be consoled—in that way," answered Valentine doggedly, going on playing as he talked. "I would rather bear my burden in my own manner, if you please, Colonel Deverill. I don't complain of anybody, and I don't ask anybody for consolation—that's game, I think—or for advice."

"So be it. Then we'll leave you out of the question," said the Colonel, putting his cue in the rack, with an air of imperturbable good temper. "But now we have to think of my daughter. I have her interests very much at heart, Mr. Belfield, although I grant you she has behaved deuced badly; and her interests demand a divorce without loss of time."

"What! You really want to see your daughter in the Divorce Court—to have her name bandied about in every newspaper in the kingdom!"

"I want to see her righted by the man who has led her wrong," answered the Colonel. "I want to see her Lord St. Austell's wife before these grey hairs go down in sorrow to the grave."

"Lord St. Austell's wife!" cried Valentine, with an hysterical augh. "Oh, I see your game, Colonel. Lady St. Austell died week or two ago, and St. Austell is free to marry again—and you would like him to marry your daughter. You are a far-seeing man, upon my soul."

He burst out laughing—laughed long and loud this time; but it was the laugh of hysteria and not of mirth. His face had whitened gradually since the beginning of this conversation, and he now looked ghastly as he stood leaning against the billiard table in the glare of the lamps. Presently the laugh changed to a choking cough, and he put his handkerchief suddenly to his lips. When he took it away a minute afterward the Colonel noticed crimson stains upon the white cambric.

"Do you spit blood?" he asked.

"Occasionally. It is nothing of any consequence."

"That is a question for your doctor to decide. I don't like to hear a powerfully-built young man hysterical, or to see him spit blood."

There was a silence for some minutes, while each man lighted a cigarette.

"Has my daughter sent for her luggage yet?"

"No."

"Strange."

"Very strange. Will you come to the drawing-room and have a chat with my mother?"

"I think not. It's getting late, so I won't disturb her. I'm going to walk home."

They went into the hall together, and Valentine helped the Colonel on with his overcoat. When they shook hands, Colonel Deverill noticed that the young man's hand was cold and damp.

"There is something wrong with my son-in-law," he said to himself, as he walked across the park, on his way to a small private gate which opened into a lane behind his cottage; "and it's deuced awkward that he should put up his back against a divorce. I believe it is sheer malevolence towards my unhappy daughter. There are some men who don't know how to be generous."

Although the Colonel was very fond of a good run with the hounds, he did not take advantage of Valentine's offer of a mount. He went the round of the stables with Sir Adrian one non-hunting morning, and examined all the horses, and praised some of them; but he would not put himself under an obligation to his son-in-law.

"I don't feel like hunting this winter, for I've had some ugly twitches of gout," he said; "I shall wait for a little fishing in the spring, or I may have a shot at the birds on the marshes—with your permission, Sir Adrian. I think your land runs down as far as the basket-maker's cottage."

"And for nearly a mile beyond," replied Adrian.

Lady Belfield begged Colonel Deverill to drop in at the Abbey whenever he liked. She felt very sorry for him in his solitude;

and she felt also that Valentine owed him some amends for the evil end that had come to his daughter's married life. It had not been all Helen's fault. The husband's neglect had to be counted as well as the wife's folly.

The Colonel settled himself in his new quarters, and was content for some weeks to lead a sleepy kind of life—shooting a little, walking a little, reading the newspapers, and dozing by his solitary fireside of an evening after his solitary dinner. He was heavy at heart in spite of all outward signs of contentment. He knew that he had not been a careful father, and that the burden of his daughter's sin must rest in some part upon his conscience. All the paternal affection of which he was capable had been awakened by his daughter in her hour of disgrace. He had thought of her and cared for her very little in her early married life, deeming that it was her husband's business to take care of her; but now in his rustic solitude her image haunted him perpetually, and his soul was sorely troubled for her sake.

"If I could but see her Lady St. Austell before I die, I might go down to the grave in peace," he said to himself.

He had dreams about her in his cottage bed-chamber, lulled by the plish-plash of the flowing tide. His sleep was haunted by those distorted visions, in which a vague reflection of our waking anxieties is interwoven with the nonsense-pictures of sleep. He saw her standing at the altar, with St. Austell by her side. But there was always some discordant image, something to stop the ceremony before the vows were spoken—or St. Austell changed into some incongruous stranger—or the church was not a church—or the parson was not a parson. No such dream ever came to a happy ending—and he dreamt such dreams by the score.

"I shall go off my head if I lead this lonely life much longer," he told himself, waking in the dead of night after one of those troubled visions. "I must get Leonora to stay with me."

He telegraphed to Mrs. Baddeley next morning—

"Dull, despondent, and ill. For God's sake come and take care of me."

Mrs. Baddeley was far from being perfect; but she was not a Goneril, and she arrived by the express next day, with her Russian poodle.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"WHAT IS IT THAT YOU FEAR?"

Tory was in high health and spirits, his thoroughbred back shorn with modish severity, and his tufts arranged after the latest fashion. His Indian bangles jingled as he walked at his mistress's side, and his neck-ribbon was of the new colour. There is always a new colour, known only to the *élite*. No sooner does it become known to the external world than it ceases to be the mode.

Tory's mistress was not looking her best. She had lost her brilliant carnation, and the splendour of her Irish eyes was dim. She looked five years older than when her father had seen her at the beginning of the last London season.

"My dear Leo, you look ill and worried," said the Colonel, as they drove away from the station, Tory sitting on the seat opposite them, shivering in his little cloth overcoat, trimmed with Astrachan, and looking about him with his topaz eyes as if he did not admire the country.

"How can I help it? Of course I have been worried," answered Leo discontentedly. "Do you suppose I have not felt the disgrace of Helen's conduct?"

"Is it generally known, do you think?"

"People know there is something wrong. Valentine ordered everything to be sold off about a month ago—all those pretty Japanese things, which I took an infinitude of trouble to get for them. They went for a mere song. I made Beeching buy a good many lots for me—screens and vases and portières—anything I could find room for. Of course people have talked—and I have been pumped perpetually about her. But it is an odd thing that I have never met with anybody who positively knows that she is with St. Austell. It is strange that no one should have met them abroad."

"I suppose they have been very careful."

"Yes; they certainly must have avoided the beaten tracks. I have watched for paragraphs in *Galignani* or the Society papers, and I have cut out half-a-dozen little allusions to St. Austell, but not one hint about her."

"She must be with him," said the Colonel. "I showed you his letter—the letter I found in her dressing-bag—when we were on board the *Clotho*. That seems decisive."

"Yes, she must be with him," replied Leo, but not with conviction.

She remembered St. Austell's preternatural *sang froid* when she accused him of running away with her sister. She remembered how he had left Charing Cross.

"I will show you the paragraphs when I can get at my despatch-box," she said. "And now tell me all about yourself. Why did you return to this dull neighbourhood, with its wretched associations?"

"Because I had a good deal to say to my son-in-law. Now that St. Austell is a free man, there ought to be no time lost in getting a divorce, don't you know?"

"In order that he may marry Helen," cried Leo, as if she had been stung.

"Of course. It is the only thing that can set her right."

"And do you think he would marry her if she were free to-morrow?" Leo asked contemptuously. "Do you know Lord St. Austell so little as to suppose that he would burden himself with a wife when he has secured a mistress—a mistress whose attractions must have grown stale by this time—a mistress who, no doubt, has made the one grand mistake that all women make under such circumstances, and has bored him with tears and contrition. A divorce will only advertize her disgrace. It will not bring her any nearer marriage with St. Austell."

"Let me once see her free to marry, and St. Austell shall make her his wife, or account to me for her dishonour," said the Colonel fiercely.

"He won't refuse to meet you. He is a crack shot like yourself—perhaps in much better practice. He will give you satisfaction, I dare say—but he won't marry my sister."

"You are diabolically bitter against that poor girl, Leonora, and I must say I think it very unwomanly on your part."

"Ah, but you see women look at these things from a different standpoint. With you men a woman has only to go wrong in order to become interesting. You open your arms to her, are ready to shelter her and fight for her. For a woman to be very pretty, and to go astray in the first bloom of her prettiness, is to command your chivalrous service. Women had need be cruel to each other, or vice would be at too high a premium."

The Colonel was distressed at his daughter's tone, but he was very glad to have her society all the same. Her presence brightened the cottage, and put flight for the time being to those morbid fancies which were beginning to weigh heavily on the Colonel—the fancy that his daughter was ill and dying in a far-off land, that St. Austell might ill-treat or desert her. Even Tory was an acquisition, and the sight of that intellectual animal, sitting bolt upright on the hearthrug, with his mouth open, and his yellow eye-balls glaring at the fire, helped to raise Colonel Deverill's drooping spirits. The Gladstonian

performance with a lump of sugar might pall, if repeated more than twenty times a day—nor was it all rapture to hear Tory play "God Save the Queen" upon a damp cottage piano—but there was usefulness in a dog that rushed at every open door, and shut it with a cheerful bang. Even Tory's dinner made a little diversion in the long winter evening, and afforded a topic for conversation.

Mrs. Baddeley did her best to cheer her father, but she was evidently out of spirits, and the effort to appear lively was almost beyond her strength. Her own affairs were not free from entanglement; for in spite of the devoted Beeching's aid—given on many occasions, as in the dressmaker difficulty—she was considerably in debt. She had not forgotten that she had a husband in India; and while he remained there he had been eminently useful to her as a shield against the shafts of slander, and an invisible court of appeal. When asked by her admirers to join in any risky adventure—a little dinner that verged on the disreputable—a water picnic in doubtful society—she had always been able to decline gracefully, on the plea that she had a husband in India.

"I think you know I am not a prude," she would say; "and I admire that lovely Mrs. Rochejaquelin Green beyond measure; but I don't think Frank would *quite* like me to meet her *en petit comité*. One cannot avoid being friendly afterwards, you see. I should be pestered with cards for her parties, and Frank might be angry."

But now Frank's regiment was to return to England in the following March, and Frank would be no longer a dear fellow in India, useful to be referred to on all occasions, but by no means troublesome or inquisitive. He would come home; and his arrival would be the signal for clamorous tradespeople to push their demands. His welcome to the nest in South Kensington would be a shower of bills, lawyers' letters, and county court summonses.

"I'm afraid poor Frank will have to go through the Bankruptcy Court," mused Mrs. Baddeley, with a compassionate sigh. "I hope he won't much mind. A good many people do it now-a-days—quite nice people; and society seems to think very little the worse of them. Short of being inordinately rich, money doesn't count in society."

Reasoning thus, the fair Leonora told herself she had no cause for being down-hearted; yet in the picturesque seclusion of Myrtle Cottage her spirits sank, and the prospect of future difficulties grew daily darker. She had hitherto lived the kind of life in which there is no leisure for thought; and now all at once she found herself with nothing to do but read novels and think of her own affairs. The novels were for the most part

less interesting than her own embarrassments, and they failed to distract her. The quiet beauty of her surroundings, the broad river, the wooded hills in the foreground and the dark ridge of the moor beyond, had no charm for her.

"It is a cut-throat place!" she exclaimed, with a shiver.

The Colonel and his daughter dined at the Abbey on Christmas Day. It was a green Christmas, mild, misty, depressing. Leo wore one of her loveliest gowns—an arrangement of dark red velvet with glittering ruby beads, which made a glowing atmosphere about her, and suggested cheerfulness; but nobody was honestly and unaffectedly cheerful at that small Christmas dinner. Mr. Rockstone made the bravest effort at mirthfulness, and filled up every gap in the conversation; but there was a gloom upon Valentine's face which would have spread a dulness in the most convivial circle, and Colonel Deverill was obviously depressed. His dreams had been troubled on the previous night. Shapeless visions had disturbed his slumbers, and filled his mind with gloom. He was weighed down by formless apprehensions. He could not define to himself what it was that he dreaded. He only knew that his mind was full of fear.

"I think I must give up going to the Abbey," he told his daughter as they drove home. "Lady Belfield is charming, and Sir Adrian is as good as gold; but I cannot get on with Valentine. I'm afraid I'm beginning to hate him."

"That is rather hard upon him," answered Leo, "for he certainly is more sinned against than sinning."

"He was a neglectful husband."

"True; but he was very good-natured. Helen could go where she liked, and enjoy herself as much as she chose. If she had had only common prudence she could have got on very well indeed."

In his retirement at Myrtle Cottage, Colonell Deverill waited for the post which brought him his letters and his newspapers with a keener impatience than he had ever felt before for those luxuries of modern life. On board a friend's yacht, or at any sleepy little Swiss or German water-cure settlement, he had been content to let his days slip by, and to know no more of the outer world than was revealed to him by an occasional *Morning News* or *Galignani;* content to forget the days of the week, and to be surprised by church bells on a Sunday morning; content almost to forget which party was in and which was out, whether his country was drifting to ruin under a Radical Cabinet, or being guided to glory by Conservatives. Letters, he had told himself, were always more likely to bring him worry than pleasure, and, unless he was expecting a cheque from his Irish agent, he was apt to be indifferent to the going and coming of the post.

But now he was intently expectant of every mail, and had a blank and dispirited feeling when the hour was over. He was expecting some kind of communication from his runaway daughter—a letter of penitence—of intercession—a letter of filial love, telling him that he was not forgotten, that even in her sinful life she was still his daughter. He had been expecting such a letter for months, and his heart sickened as the new year began without bringing him one line of greeting from the lost one.

"I suppose she is afraid to address me," he thought. "And yet she ought not to be afraid. I was never severe to my children."

He had a permanent address in London, under cover to a solicitor's firm in the City, where all letters were re-addressed to him, and this address was known to Helen. She would have had no difficulty in writing to him had she been disposed to write.

The new year began sadly under these circumstances, and even Tory's blandishments could not maintain cheerfulness. Mrs. Baddeley yawned over her novel beside the wood fire, which was the only cheerful thing in the house.

Early in the year there came a budget from Frank Baddeley, which his wife read with good-humoured indifference—till she came to a passage at which her cheek suddenly paled, and her whole aspect changed.

"What is that?" asked the Colonel excitedly; "anything about *her?*"

"No; but it is something about him."

"Read it—read it, please," gasped her father, stretching his hand across the breakfast-table, as if to clutch the flimsy sheet.

"Yes. Don't agitate yourself, father. There is not much in it. Frank says, 'St. Austell is in Ceylon. He has been there more than a month, living very quietly, and alone. I have that fact from the best authority, so you must be wrong in your idea that Helen went to Ceylon with him. They may have been together in Italy, as you say, but he arrived at Colombo alone. Tom MacDonald, of the Punjaub Regiment, was there when he came. Perhaps your sister went off with some one else after all, and you are on a false scent.'"

"Great God!" cried Colonel Deverill, starting up from the breakfast-table, and walking about the room with a distracted air. "What does it all mean? If she is not in Ceylon, where is she? We know that she ran away with St. Austell. There is his letter to prove it."

"She may have changed her mind at the last," said Leo, looking straight before her with a troubled brow, for even to her

careless temperament the matter began to assume a mysterious aspect. "Her conscience may have been awakened, and she may have run away from him, and not with him. She may have gone into a convent—or joined some Anglican sisterhood. Who can tell?"

"What am I to do?" groaned the Colonel.

"You might advertize—put an advertisement in the *Times*, so worded that she alone would understand it. Let it be repeated twenty times, at certain intervals, so that if she is in any place where the *Times* circulates, she must eventually see your advertisement."

"How can I advertize so that she will be the only one to understand?"

"Oh, we must invent a code. We must recall something in the past—known to us only—some pet name. Don't you remember, you once used to call her Pansy? She would know that Pansy was meant for her."

Leo took out her pencil, and wrote upon Major Baddeley's envelope: "Pansy's sorrowful father entreats her to write to him. A father's heart can forgive everything. She has a home still with him. Kilrush." She read this rough draft to her father.

"She could not fail to understand that," she said. "Those two names, Pansy and Kilrush, would be unmistakable."

"Yes, I think she would understand," replied the Colonel. "There are not many people who could write from Kilrush. You are right, Leo. I'll send the advertisement to the *Times* by the next post—with a cheque. I suppose that is a kind of thing one must pay for in advance."

The advertisement appeared at the head of the second column three days later, and the Colonel contemplated it with tears in his eyes. He could fancy his daughter reading it in her seclusion or desolation. Since he had discovered that she was not with St. Austell, he knew not how to picture her to himself: whether deserted and penitent; or whether as a woman who had drawn back upon the brink of the precipice, and had fled from her tempter. All his hopes for her had been dashed by that letter from Major Baddeley. As a father, he had wept over her folly and her sin; but as a man of the world it had seemed to him a good thing that she should become Lady St. Austell. He felt that from a Society point of view her reputation was gone for ever, and that her only chance was to dare Society in a new character. As a peeress, and a beauty, she might yet become the centre of a brilliant circle—on the Continent.

The advertisement appeared time after time, week after week, until the twentieth insertion had run out, and the Colonel's cheque was exhausted. There had been no reply. The year was

two months old, and the spring flowers were blooming in the shrubbery borders at Myrtle Cottage, and the little lawn was gay with golden crocus-cups, and there had been no sign or token from Helen.

Mrs. Baddeley stayed on with her father, though the London season was beginning. It was not that she loved Devonshire more, but that she feared South Kensington most. The tradespeople were pushing for their accounts, and lawyers' letters were growing frequent. It was easier to face these things at a distance than on the spot, where every vibration of the electric bell jarred her nerves, and set her heart beating vehemently, in apprehension of immediate evil. Here at least, though she received the letters, she did not hear the bell; and she was out of reach of any importunate creditor who might be so audacious as to demand an interview. So she put her arms round the Colonel's neck one morning at breakfast, and told him she would not desert him. She would stay till Frank's return.

"God bless you, my love," faltered her father, "I thought you would stand by me in my loneliness. Indeed, Leo, I am half broken-hearted about your sister. Her present existence is a mystery to me, and I can scarcely bear my life under the burden of that mystery. If she was anywhere within the reach of this paper," striking his fist upon the *Times* which lay open on the table, "she must have understood my appeal. Where in Heaven's name is she hiding? Some one must know."

"Yes, some one must know," answered Leonora. "I will tell you of one thing that you can do, father. You cannot go to Ceylon. The journey is too long, and you are too old. But you can telegraph a question to St. Austell. Ask him if he knows where Helen is to be found. Ask him to answer you on his honour. He cannot refuse to answer such an appeal."

"I'll telegraph to him. You are right, Leo. I must find out where my poor girl is. I must leave no stone unturned."

He did not like to send his ocean-message from Chadford Post-office, where it would inevitably give occasion for gossip; so he went to Exeter next day, intending to send the message from there; but, after he had alighted at the Exeter Station, it suddenly occurred to him that he was just in time for the London express, and, on the spur of the moment, he decided on going to London. He telegraphed to Mrs. Baddeley, promising to return next day, and he took his ticket for Waterloo.

It was six o'clock when he arrived, and dark, so he put himself in a hansom, drove straight to the Badminton, and went into the coffee-room to order his dinner. When he had given the order for half-past seven, he went to the reading-room, and seated himself at the table near the fire, to compose his message.

There were telegraph forms on the table, but he began a rough draft on a sheet of paper.

"To Lord St. Austell, Ceylon.

"I entreat you inform me of my daughter's present whereabouts. Answer frankly on your honour, to a heart-broken father. Deverill."

He read the words three times over; wondering if they were strong enough. He paused after the third reading, wiped his forehead with a weary air, and, looking up absently, with his pen in his hand, saw St. Austell standing in front of the fireplace opposite him.

"My God!" he cried, starting to his feet. "This is the most extraordinary thing. I thought you were in Ceylon."

"I was until a few weeks ago. I came home the week before last—too soon, my doctor tells me, but I was heartily sick of the place. You don't look over well, Deverill."

The Colonel was ghastly. He had dropped back into his seat, and was arranging the papers before him with tremulous fingers.

He handed St. Austell the rough draft of the message, without a word.

"What does it mean?" St. Austell asked, after he had read the blurred words in the Colonel's big penmanship.

"The question is plain enough, I think. Until very lately I thought my daughter was with you in Ceylon. I hear she was not there; but, all the same, you are likely to know her present address. For pity's sake tell me where she is—at once. I am longing to find her—to protect and cherish her. I am ready to forgive all—to forgive her and you."

The room was empty, but the Colonel spoke in suppressed tones, with the consciousness that he was in a public place.

"My dear Colonel, I wish I could help you—but I can't. As for forgiveness, you have nothing to pardon in me except the fact that I was madly in love with your daughter—and tried to win her—and failed. If my sin in so trying was great, my punishment was greater. I never loved any woman as I loved Helen Belfield, and she threw me over at the last moment."

"But I have your letter of instructions about her journey—everything must have been planned between you."

"It was, so far as I could plan; but I tell you she threw me over. She was to have met me at Exeter, but she didn't. I waited for three trains, and then went on to London in a rage—mad, despairing. I had been most completely fooled."

"But she meant to run away with you?"

"So I thought on the previous afternoon."

"She made her plans deliberately; her trunks were all packed."

"Indeed. That looks business-like. And yet she threw me over, you see, and carried her trunks somewhere else."

"No. Her luggage was all left in her own rooms at the Abbey. Wherever she went, she must have fled from the house in such a state of mind that she took no trouble to secure her own property; nor even her comforts for the journey. Her travelling-bag—my own wedding gift—was left. It was in an inner pocket of that bag that I found your letter."

"And she has not claimed her belongings since then?" asked St. Austell, with a troubled brow.

"No."

"And you have heard nothing of her since that time—absolutely nothing?"

"Not one word. I thought she was with you. You were heard of in Paris—with a lady."

"A passing acquaintance—and a Parisienne."

"You were heard of in Venice—again with a lady."

"An old friend—a Florentine Countess, who was good enough to go about with me a little in my solitude—we dined together, and lunched together *al fresco*, half a dozen times. That was all. And you have heard nothing about your daughter—in all these months—from August to March—you have had no letter from her—no information? directly or indirectly?"

"Not one word."

"Then, Colonel Deverill, I can only say the business looks very alarming," said St. Austell, turning his face to the mantel-piece, and resting his head upon his arm.

The Colonel saw that he was deeply moved. There was a silence of some moments, and then the older man asked in a faltering voice:

"What is it that you fear?"

"I don't know, I—I—can't tell you. My fears are vague and shapeless; but it is a shock to me to find you are so completely in the dark about her. I loved her devotedly, Colonel Deverill. If she had trusted herself to me as she promised, I would have made her my wife, now that I am a free man. I would have done all that a man can do to recompense her for her sacrifice."

"I believe she must be in hiding somewhere; in some Anglican sisterhood, some semi-monastic retreat, where she is not allowed to see the newspapers, or to hold any communication with the outer world," said the Colonel, after a pause.

"Yes, it may be so," answered St. Austell, moving away from the mantel-piece, and seating himself opposite Colonel Deverill at the writing-table. "It may be so. It would be like her to go and bury herself alive in a fit of religious enthusiasm. She was a creature of rapid changes of mood. When I thought I was most secure of her, knowing very well that she loved me, she

spread her wings as suddenly as a butterfly, and was gone. I was hardly surprised when she cheated me; but I was very angry. My pride was wounded. I had grovelled before her, and I told myself I would grovel no more. So I went off to the Continent in sullen despair, and I went to Ceylon in the same temper, and my life was loathsome to me all the time I stayed there."

"Upon my soul I am sorry for you," said the Colonel, "though I suppose I ought to be the last man in the world to say so. It is a most unhappy business, unhappy from first to last. She might have married an excellent young man, who could have given her a fine position. She chose to jilt him for the sake of his worthless brother, who neglected her. Her whole life has been a mistake."

"Which she is trying to atone for, perhaps, in the dull round of conventual work, nursing the sick, feeding the hungry, praying, fasting, wearing out her young life within four walls. It is maddening to contemplate," said St. Austell.

And yet it was not so bad as the fear which had shaken him just now, when he had disguised his thought from the Colonel, not daring to breathe that apprehension in a father's ear.

He had feared that Helen might have made away with herself. That she had felt herself too weak to withstand temptation, and had preferred death to dishonour. There might be a woman left, perhaps even in this waning nineteenth century, capable of such a choice.

"Will you let me help you to search for her," he asked, "not directly, but indirectly?"

"How can you help me?"

St. Austell took out his card-case, and wrote a name and address on the back of a card.

"That man can help you to solve any mystery," he said. "He is a gentleman in education and manners. You may trust him, and thoroughly. When it comes to the matter of recompense, refer him to me."

Colonel Deverill did not go back to Devonshire next day as he had promised. He was absent from Myrtle Cottage for nearly a week, and when he returned he was accompanied by a gentleman whom he introduced to Mrs. Baddeley as his old friend Melnotte, the famous African traveller.

Leonora was not learned upon the subject of Africa or the Royal Geographical Society. She had heard such names as Cameron and Stanley, which she associated vaguely with sand, camels, black men, and yellow fever. She had no love for the Dark Continent. It gave her neither silk gowns nor high-art furniture; and she was proud to remember that her diamonds

were Brazilians. She yawned when her father expatiated upon the interesting experiences of his guest, and put him forward as a man whom it was an honour to know.

"He seems an inoffensive little person," said Leo, "and Tory evidently likes him. But I cannot imagine him getting the better of a lion, or discovering the source of a river. And then he is so dreadfully lame! How did he ever get about Africa with that lame leg?"

"He was not always lame. His gun burst one day when he was shooting antelopes, and wounded him in the hip."

"Well, he is a rather nice little soul, and I hope he will put you in better spirits," answered Leo lightly.

Her father told her nothing about his interview with St. Austell. He was unusually grave and silent after his return from London, but on the arrival of an invitation to dinner from Lady Belfield, he hastened to accept it.

"My friend Melnotte, the African traveller, is staying with me," he wrote, "and I should much like to be allowed to include him in our party."

The messenger who carried Colonel Deverill's note brought back Lady Belfield's reply.

"I shall be charmed to make Mr. Melnotte's acquaintance," she wrote, "though I confess to a lamentable ignorance about Africa. I am prepared to be interested, but not intelligent."

Leonora Baddeley had described Mr. Melnotte accurately when she spoke of him as an inoffensive little person. He was small, with a small round head, close-cropped hair, and rather insignificant features. But his eyes were remarkable—luminous, keen, quick, and yet steadfast. Those rather prominent blue-grey eyes had a kindly look too, keen as they were. Mr. Melnotte was not handsome; but he was a pleasant-looking little man, and seemed thoroughly at his ease in a dress-coat, in spite of Africa.

"I almost expected to see you with a circle of ostrich feathers standing straight up from your head," said Leonora, laughing, as she stood ready for her fur cloak, gorgeous in black and gold, one of those gowns which defy description, and leave only a vague impression of Brussels lace, brocaded velvet, and bullion.

"I left my feathers in Basuto Land," answered Melnotte, "but I sometimes regret a continent upon which I was not obliged to dress for dinner."

He seemed to enjoy himself at the Abbey, whatever his prejudice against civilization. He was graciously received by Lady Belfield; and Sir Adrian talked to him for a great part of the evening, and questioned him closely about his African experiences.

"I have read most of the books upon Africa," said Adrian, "but I blush to say I have not read yours."

"I have not written a book. I have been content to jog along in a very quiet way. I am pretty well known in a certain part of Africa, but I doubt if anybody has ever heard of me or my adventures. I am not a Fellow of the Geographical."

Sir Adrian knew this beforehand, as he had looked up the list of Fellows, and had been surprised at not discovering Melnotte's name.

The traveller's conversation was not the less agreeable because his fame had been somewhat exaggerated by Colonel Deverill. He told a good many interesting anecdotes, some of which were rather familiar to Sir Adrian's ear; but then there must needs be a resemblance between all adventures in a primitive world, where the changes have to be rung upon blacks, buffaloes, lions, alligators, and fever.

Mr. Rockstone, Mr. and Mrs. Freemantle, and their daughter Lucy, were of the party, and every one at the table, except Valentine, seemed interested in the lion and buffalo stories, the serious aspect of desert life being relieved by recollections of a comic American, who had been Mr. Melnotte's fellow-traveller at one period. Mr. Belfield heard these anecdotes with a gloomy brow, and was not particularly civil to the narrator.

It was the first time that Valentine had seen his father-in-law since the Colonel's journey to London; and when they were in the billiard-room after dinner, Colonel Deverill took occasion to mention St. Austell's return. Mr. Freemantle and Mr. Melnotte were playing billiards; while Valentine and the Colonel sat on a raised settee at the end of the room, in a panelled recess decorated with breech-loaders of the latest fashion, and rapiers that had been carried by bucks and bloods in the days of Addison and Chesterfield.

Mr. Melnotte played a neat game, but he was a very slow player—aggravatingly slow, Mr. Freemantle thought, when he had to wait through a longish break, his opponent deliberating before every shot, and looking down his cue meditatively before he took his aim.

"A man who can play as well as he does needn't be so confoundedly slow," thought Mr. Freemantle.

Colonel Deverill smoked half his cigar in silence, while Valentine sat by his side, apparently engrossed by watching the game.

"Have you known your African friend long?" he asked presently.

"A longish time."

"He was never at Morcomb, was he?"

"No; he was in Basuto Land when I had Morcomb."

"Ah, to be sure. He is not very yellow, considering he has been so long under an African sun."

"Oh, he has been back over a twelvemonth, knocking about in Ireland," answered the Colonel. "But never mind him. I've got something more important to talk about. I have seen St. Austell."

Valentine's brow darkened, and his colour slowly faded, till even his lips were white.

"When—where?" was all he asked.

The Colonel described the meeting at the Badminton.

"There has been a mistake," he said, in conclusion. "I no longer ask you to divorce your wife. I ask you now to find her. It is your duty to do that, and without an hour's loss of time."

"That is all mighty fine," exclaimed Valentine savagely. "My wife chooses to run away and hide herself, after penning a deliberate avowal of her love for another man—and you tell me it is my duty to find her. I tell you that from the hour she wrote that letter, she was dead to me. It was our final, irrevocable parting. Living or dead she was my wife no longer. You are her father; she has not outraged you—she has not cast you off with scornful words, as she did me. It is for you to look after her."

"You may be sure, Mr. Belfield, that I shall not fail to do a father's duty," answered the Colonel, throwing down the end of his cigar, and grinding it under his heel, to the detriment of the polished parquet.

He felt that Valentine had some justification for repudiating all obligation towards a wife who had written such a letter as that in which Helen had declared her intended flight. That her courage had failed, or that her conscience had been awakened at the last moment, would hardly make atonement to an insulted husband.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A DECIDED CASE OF DRY-ROT

After that brief conversation with Colonel Deverill in the billiard-room, Valentine Belfield withdrew himself still more from the society of his fellow-men. Even his appearances in the hunting-field became spasmodic. He was rarely seen at the meet, but would contrive to fall in with the hounds about the middle

of the day, and would ride till the finish like a modern Zamiel, or any other demoniac character, with a reckless disregard of his own bones which was only a little less offensive than his carelessness about other people.

"I believe Belfield must offer a premium for kicking horses, or he could never get such brutes as he rides," said Mr. Freemantle, who rode a sober well-mannered weight-carrier, in a sober and gentleman-like way.

There was a general feeling that Mr. Belfield had gone altogether to the bad since his wife's disappearance. People pitied him, but wanted to see as little of him as possible. He had never been a favourite in the neighbourhood, and of late his sullen manner had been calculated to alienate even friendship.

And now it had become known that St. Austell was in London, and people—especially the feminine portion of the community—began to be exercised in mind as to what could have become of Mrs. Belfield. Had she eloped with St. Austell, and had they quarrelled and parted after brief union? Or had she never gone off with him? That was the question debated with hushed breath over many an afternoon tea-table.

"Has she any old aunt in Ireland with whom she would be likely to be living?" asked one of the Miss Treduceys. "Most girls have an old aunt that they can go to on an emergency."

"I don't believe Mrs. Belfield has anything so respectable as an old aunt belonging to her," replied Dorothy Toffstaff, who was soured by three unsuccessful seasons in London, during which all the attentions she had received had been too obviously inspired by her father's wealth rather than by her own charms. "My idea is that she went off with St. Austell, as everybody thought at the time of her disappearance, and that he has grown sick of an empty-headed beauty, and has left her in India. She would be sure to get picked up by somebody," added Miss Toffstaff, placidly consigning Mrs. Belfield to the Oriental gutter.

Thus lightly did society at Chadford discuss the problem of a fallen sister's fate; but it was not so lightly that Lady Belfield considered the mystery of her daughter-in-law's disappearance. In a conversation with Colonel Deverill, she drew from him much that had passed between him and St. Austell, and the idea that Helen had changed her mind at the last, after writing that terrible letter, filled her with a new hope.

What more likely than that the erring girl had turned to some conventual sanctuary as the possible shelter from temptation, as Louise de la Vallière in the dawn of love fled from her royal lover to the convent. There only could she find a safeguard against her own passionate heart, an aid for her own weak will. Such a course would account for the unclaimed

trunks in the bed-chamber. For the handmaid of Heaven, vowed to holy poverty, fine clothes and feminine luxuries were a dead letter.

Impressed with this idea, Lady Belfield resolved to travel quietly through the West of England, visiting all those institutions, Anglican or Roman, to which Helen might possibly have attached herself. She had taken Mr. Rockstone into her confidence, and with his aid she had obtained all the information necessary to guide her search.

She told Adrian nothing of her purpose until her plan was made, and she was on the eve of setting out with her old servant for her companion. The journey would not be a long one. The furthest point was to be the convent in Lanherne Valley, on the north coast of Cornwall.

To her disappointment, Adrian strongly opposed her scheme.

"Dear mother, no good would result from all that fatigue and anxiety on your part," he said gently. "I am sure that Helen is not in any such retreat."

"But how can you be sure?"

"Mother, I have reason to know. You must ask me no more. You must have some pity upon me," said Adrian, deadly pale.

"You know that lost girl's fate, and yet hide the truth from me."

"There are secrets that must be kept, that are sacred. Mother, you know how fondly I love you. In my own life there has never been a secret; but in this case I cannot tell you all I know without betraying another person. You would not have me guilty of dishonour?"

"No, no; you know I would not. But let me understand—give me some kind of comfort. You know where she is, then—you have known all along?"

Adrian bent his head in assent.

"And yet you have allowed me to torture myself about her?"

"I was tongue-tied."

"I see. She confided in you. It was to her you bound yourself to silence?"

"I can answer no questions."

"But you can tell me that she is safe—happy?"

"She is safe. She did not elope with St. Austell. Her last sin against her husband was the writing of that fatal letter."

"Thank God! But why may I not know her retreat? Why may I not see her again? You know that I loved her as a daughter. Even if she can never be reunited to her husband, she may at least be restored in some measure to me. And there is her poor father, too. Why should he be tortured by uncer-

tainty, or allowed to think that his daughter is leading a wicked life? It is your duty to reveal the truth, Adrian."

"It is my duty to keep my oath. Mother, if you say one word more, I shall regret having trusted you. I beseech you to keep faith with me. Not one syllable to any one, least of all to Valentine."

"Poor Valentine. Can you see him so miserable, and yet not tell him?"

"Nothing I could tell would help him. Mother, the best thing you can do for your own peace of mind—and for us all—is to forget the past so far as it can be forgotten. There is nothing that can be done; nothing. I think you know that I am not without conscience—that I have some sense of duty. If there were anything that could be done I would do it; but there is nothing. As I hope for the life eternal, there is no act of yours or mine that can be of any service to her whose loss we both deplore."

His words and looks were so deeply earnest that his mother could not disbelieve. Adrian had been her strong rock in the last few years; her friend and companion, the one being whose presence always brought brightness and comfort, upon whose sound sense and unselfish affection she could rely. She was mystified, but she was submissive; and the journey to Lanherne was given up.

She told Mr. Rockstone only that she had changed her mind.

"I think you have done right in abandoning your idea," he said. "Be sure that if Mrs. Belfield is in any retreat of that kind, she will communicate with you before long. Her heart will yearn for you as time goes by, and the longing to see you or to hear from you will be too strong to be repressed by any ascetic rule, however severe."

After that conversation with his mother, Adrian had an uneasy feeling that he had said too much, that he had gone too near the betrayal of his brother's dreadful secret. Yet to have allowed his mother to follow a phantom, to wear out her heart in false hopes and disappointing researches, was more than his duty as a son would allow. His first thought had been of his mother; it was for her sake that he had kept Valentine's secret, and it was for her sake that he had lifted a corner of the veil. It was for her sake that he tried to seem happy when his heart was gnawed by care, and his life darkened by the shadow of fear.

"Let us forget," he had said to her; and often in the long slow days, he had said to himself, "Oh, God, if I could but forget!"

His daily walk was by the river. He seemed drawn there by an irresistible attraction. Scarcely a day passed on which he

did not stand beside that silent pool, beneath whose dark water lay the murdered wife. He went there oftenest in the twilight, when all things had a vague and ghostly aspect, or when the eye created its own spectres out of the commonest forms. He wondered sometimes that her spirit had never appeared to him, when his thoughts were so full of her. He gazed with melancholy eyes among the shadows of the willow trunks, half expecting to see a spectral form waving tremulously above the bank, like a ghostly Undine. But there was nothing. The dead made no sign.

One evening he saw a red spark shining brightly amidst the grey. It came nearer as he advanced along the path, and presently he found himself face to face with Mr. Melnotte, who was strolling quietly along, smoking a big cigar.

"Good-evening, Sir Adrian. A mild night, and a picturesque spot."

"Very. But I should think it must seem uncommonly tame to you after the Zambesi Falls."

"Oh, but I am catholic in my tastes. I can admire an English landscape as heartily as if I had never seen Africa. A favourite walk of yours, Sir Adrian?"

"Yes; it is one of my favourite walks."

"I thought so. I have seen you here nearly every evening for the last ten days. I generally take my afternoon stroll in this direction, but on the opposite bank. Lady Belfield was so good as to say I might make free with the park and meadows."

"Naturally. Any friend of Colonel Deverill's would be welcome. Is this your first experience of Devonshire?"

"Of this side of the county, yes. I know the south coast pretty well. A delightful county."

"You are not a Devonshire man?"

"I have not that privilege."

There was a silence. Mr. Melnotte did not volunteer any information as to his birth or parentage. He was a curious little man in this wise, and, except for his African experiences, seemed to be a man without a history. Sir Adrian wondered how his friendship with Colonel Deverill could have come about. The two men seemed to have so little in common. From a good-natured impulse, rather than for any particular reason, he asked Mr. Melnotte to dinner, an invitation which was promptly accepted.

"It is always a pleasure to visit such a house as yours, Sir Adrian," he said. "A house with a history. No doubt the Abbey has its history."

"Yes. It has a good many histories, or traditions."

"Any ghosts? Any story of a dark crime in the remote past?"

"I have heard of neither ghost nor crime."

"Well, it is a noble old house, even without those embellishments," said Melnotte cheerfully, "and the park and gardens are perfect. This is a tributary of the Chad, I suppose, this river in your grounds?"

"Yes, it unites with the Chad lower down."

"A swift, deepish river, eh?"

"Swift and deep."

"It makes a very pretty feature in your grounds. Nothing like water for giving beauty and variety to a landscape. To-morrow evening at eight, I think you said, Sir Adrian? Good-night."

Mr. Melnotte crossed a rustic bridge and disappeared in the twilight on the further bank, while Adrian strolled slowly along the cypress walk.

He was met by Lucy Freemantle, who unconsciously suggested a reminiscence of Shakespeare's Beatrice.

"I have been sent to ask you to come to tea," she said, blushing a little, her complexion of lilies and roses looking brighter than ever in the grey winter atmosphere.

"You were very good to take so much trouble about me," answered Adrian, as they shook hands.

"Oh, it was no trouble. I am always glad of a run. Mother and I came to call upon Lady Belfield, and Lady Belfield was getting fidgety about you, so mother told me to run and look for you, and I guessed I should find you this way."

"How clever of you."

They were on very friendly terms, Lucy having known the Abbey and the Abbey people all her life. A few years ago when she had been in the nursery she had looked up to Sir Adrian as a very grand personage, standing as it were apart from all other young men upon the strength of a superior position and superior attainments, but of late she had felt herself more upon a level with him, and more at her ease in his society. He called her Lucy, as a matter of course, having known her in pinafores, but she called him Sir Adrian.

"Is my brother at home?" he asked, as they walked towards the Abbey.

"No, there is no one but Lady Belfield and mother. They are talking parish talk—about the poor old people and their ailments—such dreadful complications. How hard it seems that the poor should suffer in all ways. People who know nothing about them think they are healthy and hardy because of their scanty fare and open-air life; but when one comes to know them, one finds that theory a hollow mockery. The open air may be very good for us, but the poor get too much of it."

She spoke warmly, having just come from a scene of suffering

in one of the cottages. She was a frank, warm-hearted, energetic girl, tall and strong, in the full bloom of youth and beauty, a girl for whom life meant action and duty, not dress and pleasure. Yet at a county ball she danced as gaily as the most feather-headed of her sisters, and never complained, as they did, of an evening being "slow."

Lady Belfield and Mrs. Freemantle were sitting by the fire in the inner drawing-room, the cosy tea-table and hissing kettle between them. They had been joined by Mr. Rockstone, who sat in one of the most luxurious of the large arm-chairs, with his legs stretched out in front of the hearth, basking in the glow of a friendly fireside, after a long day among his poorest parishioners.

They were talking of Valentine.

"He ought to make an effort, my dear Lady Belfield," said the Vicar. "The blow that has fallen upon him is a heavy one, but it is almost unmanly to succumb as he has done. His whole being is undergoing deterioration. He has brooded upon the one great wrong until his soul has become steeped in gall. He is a misanthrope at an age when men generally love their fellow-creatures. Something must be done to save him from himself."

"Yes, something must be done," echoed Mrs. Freemantle. "It is terrible to see a fine young man like Valentine lapsing into physical and moral decay. My husband tells me that he shuns all his old friends—does not even show at the meet, and rides in a way that proves he cares no more for other people's lives than he does for his own. He ought to go to Australia."

"That is the remedy, Mrs. Freemantle," said the Vicar, "a new country—Australia, or the Red River district—a new and not too civilized country—unfamiliar surroundings. That kind of thing is the only remedy for a mind diseased. I know it would grieve you to part with him, my dear Lady Belfield, but you would have him back in two or three years a new man. Whereas, if you let him stay here, decay is inevitable. You remember what Dickens says about the dry-rot in a man. I'm afraid poor Valentine's is a case of dry-rot."

"I would do anything for his welfare—sacrifice anything," replied Lady Belfield.

"Then you and Adrian must put your heads together and persuade him to travel—California, Texas, Red River, or even Africa, if he fancies shooting antelopes or dealing in buffaloes. You can take advantage of this Mr. Melnotte, who, I am told, is a mighty traveller. The grand thing is to rouse Valentine from his present apathy, and set him going in some way."

"I am entirely of your opinion, Vicar," said Adrian. "My brother wants new surroundings. A young man without aims

or interests, moping in a country place, is a sorry spectacle. I will take him in hand to-night."

"Do, my dear Adrian," exclaimed Mrs. Freemantle. "I have known you and your brother too long to be able to see either of you going wrong without speaking my mind."

They sat round the fire for some time after this, talking of many things, enjoying the blaze of the great pine logs and the aroma of Lady Belfield's Indian tea; but two among them were heavy at heart, cheerful as the general tone of the conversation might be. For Adrian there had been no such thing as peace of mind since that fatal night. His life had been one long pretence.

It was a hunting day, and on such days Valentine always stayed out among the latest, rarely appearing until after dinner. He would come into the house on the stroke of eight, perhaps, and would be changing his clothes while the others were dining. He would dine alone between nine and ten, at a little table in front of the billiard-room fire. He had never been a gourmand, but he ate now with the air of a man who hardly knows what he is eating—taking anything the servants set before him, and drinking more than was good for him.

"He ain't got no appreciation of a nice little dinner," said Andrew despondently. "It don't pay to take pains about it, Mrs. Marrable, as I tells cook. Give him a bottle of burgundy and the liqueur-stand after dinner, and he asks no questions."

There were no more of those cheery tea-drinkings with the mother after the day's sport; no more recitals of the day's adventures. The young man went out alone in the morning, moody and silent; he came home in the same temper. His mother had watched him in quiet grief, hoping that as the months went by the bruised spirit would recover; but time seemed only to deepen that abiding gloom, and of late she had grown hopeless. Thus it was that she was ready to receive any plausible suggestion for his welfare.

He was late on this particular evening; and it was not until half-past nine that he was ready for his dinner.

"I'll go and talk to him after he has dined," said Adrian, who had been lingering over dessert with his mother, trying to cheer her with the promise of brighter days.

"Do, dear. For pity's sake, influence him for good. I am helpless. His mind is a sealed book to me. He has never confided in me from the time of his boyhood. He has taken his own way always, for good or for evil."

Valentine was sitting in a Glastonbury chair in front of the wide fire-place, the burgundy decanter before him, almost empty. The lamps over the billiard-table were unlighted, and the spa-

cious room was half in shadow. The firelight flickered on guns and swords in the recess at the further end, and there was a circle of soft light round the spot where Valentine sat, from the shaded colza lamp on the small round table.

"A good run, Val?" asked Adrian, seating himself opposite his brother.

"Pretty good."

"You must have killed uncommonly late."

"We killed at sunset, on Plimpsted Ridge."

"But that means five o'clock, and three-quarters of an hour's ride home. Where have you been since?"

"I don't know."

"Valentine!"

"Don't stare at me, man! I tell you I don't know. I have been riding about somewhere—losing myself on the moor, if you like. Great God, if I could only lose myself altogether—ride away into some enchanted valley, and fall asleep there for ever."

It was almost the first time he had spoken openly of his despair. From the hour of the crime until now there had been no confidence between the brothers. They had lived together, had talked of the daily business of life; but there had been an impassable gulf betwixt the past and the present. By mutual consent they had been dumb.

But to-night Valentine was utterly worn out in mind and body, fagged, helpless, nervous. That powerful frame and strong self-reliant temper had been broken by the slow agonies of remorse. Brutal as the man's nature might be, conscience was not dead in him. It had awakened in the hour when he found himself alone after his crime—face to face with the memory of a murder.

It had never slept since.

"Valentine," began Adrian earnestly, "you are leading a miserable life. Things cannot go on like this."

"You mean that I had better do as your criminal of the lower classes sometimes does under such circumstances—give myself up—walk into Freemantle's study to-morrow morning and tell him that I killed my wife. Is that what you mean?"

"No. It is too late for that course. What I mean is that you must leave the scene of your—misadventure. You have lingered here too long. You must go away—to another continent—Africa, Australia, wherever you can find the resources which will give you most relief of mind. The past is past, Val. There is no help for that. Let it be past. You have suffered for your sin of a moment in all the long months that have gone by since that fatal night. You will suffer more or less to the end."

"More or less, no doubt. I have the privilege of an excellent memory," answered Valentine, staring gloomily at the fire.

"Your self-torture can do no good to you or to any one else. Far away, in the wild free life which suits your temperament, you will at least suffer less. Anything would be better than the stagnation of your existence here."

"You are right. Anything would be better—but I think the best would be death."

"Don't say that, Val. Men have outlived worse sorrows than yours."

"Men are made of very hard wood, and I flattered myself—till last summer—that I was teak or iron-wood; but the dry-rot of remorse has got into me, all the same. I am worm-eaten to the core. Yes, I think you are right, Adrian. I must get away from this place, if I don't want to become a howling lunatic. I have stayed here in a kind of gloomy despair, thinking that I could hardly be more miserable here than anywhere else—but you are right. I have stayed too long. I will stay no longer. Here I am a cause of misery to others as well as to myself. In the desert—or the bush—I shall be my own man again. There will be no need for hypocrisy."

"Your mind will clear and lighten face to face with unsophisticated Nature, Val," said Adrian affectionately. "You will begin a new life. Even the memory of your sorrow will be softened in that far-off atmosphere. You will look back upon your old self gently, as we remember the dead. You will have opportunities of helping others—of doing brave and generous deeds. You will be born again, a better and a wiser man. My brother—my beloved brother, the second half of myself, I have infinite faith in you yet." He laid his hand caressingly upon his brother's shoulder. He felt as if a great burden was lifted off his heart by this conversation of to-night. For the first time since the catastrophe that had wrecked both their lives the brothers had spoken together freely. It was like a renewal of brotherly love.

"My dear Adrian, you are a great deal too good to me," said Valentine; and this from him was much.

"You must go away, Val; but you must do nothing hurriedly. Mrs. Freemantle was talking about you to my mother this afternoon, saying that you looked ill and mopish, and needed change. My mother admitted the fact, and it was agreed that you should be persuaded to travel. Your departure will therefore seem perfectly natural to all this little world of Chadford. There will be no appearance of flight. All you have to think of, therefore, is the place to which you would like to go—all you have to do is to follow the bent of your own inclination."

"I will go to Africa. There is better sport there than in Australia—and a freer life."

"If you decide upon Africa, Melnotte may be of use to you."

"I don't like Melnotte, and I don't believe in his African experiences. I strongly suspect that the man is an impostor. He is too glib."

"But his stories of adventure have a vivid air, as if he had lived among the scenes and people he describes."

"The fellow is a good actor, that is all. Some rowdy adventurer whom the Colonel has picked up in a gambling den. Melnotte may have been to the Cape, perhaps. His experiences in the interior I rank as fiction."

This idea agreed curiously with Adrian's own suspicions as to Mr. Melnotte's truthfulness. Those African stories of his were rather too good and too picturesque to have happened to one traveller. The average man's experiences are dull enough. They ring the changes upon famine, fever, and sport. But Melnotte seemed to have passed from hairbreadth escape to romantic situation, from dramatic encounter to picturesque rescue, with an electrical brilliancy. He had slain his lions by the horde, and shot his gemsbocks in hecatombs. There was exaggeration, no doubt; but whether the man were an actual impostor remained to be proved.

"I don't want anybody's advice!" said Valentine decisively. "If I can once brace myself up to leave this place, I shall go to London, get the kind of outfit I think necessary, and then sail for the Cape. Once there I can pick up all the information I want about the interior, and I shall plan my route from there."

"When will you start?"

"I shall go to London by an early train to-morrow, and to the Cape by the first good steamer that can carry me there."

"To-morrow? That's soon."

"Why should I delay? I have been staying here face to face with a spectre—like a man oppressed by nightmare, who faces some great horror and cannot move hand or foot. The sooner I go the better."

"Let me go to London with you, Val. I should like to see you off."

"No, no. I am not fit company for my fellow-men yet awhile. Perhaps after ten years in Africa I may be better. Let me suffer my purgation, Adrian. Let me wrestle with the memory of sin, as Jacob wrestled with the angel—and then perhaps some day"—with a stifled sob—"I shall be better worthy of your unselfish love—and of my mother."

"God help you to forgetfulness, Val. But let me go to London with you."

"No, I want to be alone there. I have something to do. I

will wire to you before I sail; and then, if there were time, and you would like to come and shake hands at parting——"

"Be sure I will go to you, if you give me the chance. It will comfort the mother to hear of you at the last moment of leaving. She would like to be there herself, dear soul, if you would let her."

"Dear soul, poor soul," murmured Valentine, with a remorseful tenderness which was strange to his rough nature. "She has given me honey, and I have given her gall. I have been a fountain of bitterness to you both. But it is past. Good-night, and good-bye, till I sail. I shall be off early to-morrow morning."

"But you will bid your mother good-bye."

"Must I? That will be hard. I should like to slip away without any leave-taking. I would write to her from London."

"She would be heart-broken if you left her like that."

"Perhaps you are right. It is the weakness of her character to be fond of me. I'll see her in the morning before I start. She will be happier when I am gone—safe and happy—with you. You ought to marry, Adrian. You owe as much to my mother as well as to yourself. There is Lucy Freemantle, who has been in love with you for the last five years."

'Valentine!'

"It's a true bill. I've seen the growing passion from the time she left off short frocks and long hair. You have been her idol from the day she left the nursery—perhaps before. I dare say she was often thinking of you over Pinnock or Lingard. Marry her, Adrian. She has not one of the attributes of the typical girl, and will make you a true and honest wife."

"I will wait till my time comes, Val," answered Adrian, with a sad smile. "It has not come yet."

Lady Belfield was always an early riser. She was in her garden next morning, looking at the first daffodils, when Valentine joined her, clad for a journey, in fur-lined overcoat and deer-stalker cap.

"Mother," he began abruptly, "Adrian and I had a long brotherly talk last night, and he advised me to try change of scene as a cure for bitter memories. I am going abroad for a spell."

"Yes, dear. Yes, it will be a good thing, I am sure," answered his mother, paling suddenly at the mere thought of a possible parting; "but you will not be going just yet. You will take time to think about it."

"I am going at once. You know I was never given to irresolution. I have done most things, for good or evil, on the spur of the moment. I am off by the 8.35. My portmanteaux have

gone down to the stable yard. I shall stay a day or two in town, and then sail for the Cape."

"For the Cape! That is so far, Val. Why not go to Italy or Spain?"

"Tame, hackneyed, intolerable. The holiday ground of self-opinionated Yankees and personally conducted Cockneys. No, if change of scene is to do me any good, if I am to get out of myself, I must get face to face with Nature. Africa is the place for me. Don't be afraid, dear mother. The Dark Continent is as safe a solitude as Herne Bay."

"And you are going—this morning?"

"At once. The dog-cart is waiting for me. Good-bye."

He clasped his mother in his arms, kissed her as he had not kissed her for years—hardly since he was a schoolboy. His own eyes were not innocent of tears as he rushed away, leaving her to sob out her sorrow in the secluded shrubbery walk which her footsteps had so often trodden. Never had she felt more desolate than in this parting with her wayward son, and yet she told herself that it was well he were gone. Anything must be better than to see him as he had been since last August.

The South-Western Railway conveyed Mr. Belfield to Exeter, but at the junction there he had a choice of lines, and the Great Western suited him best on this occasion. He crossed from one platform to the other, took his ticket for Paddington, and came out upon the departure platform of the Great Western, under the big clock.

The platform was not so crowded as usual, and the train wa not due for five minutes. As he walked slowly towards the end of the station, Valentine passed a man whose face flashed upon him like the sight of a ghost in high noon.

The wintry sun shone upon those pale and high-bred features. He saw the face looking at him, half in hatred, half in scorn, and he could not give back scorn for scorn, hate for hate. He who had never feared his fellow-men sickened at the sight of this man, and passed on with quickened step, and eyes looking steadily forward, pretending not to see that familiar face, the face of the man who had stolen his wife's heart.

St. Austell stopped and looked back at him.

"As I am alive, that was the face of a felon," he said to himself; "and the mystery of Helen's fate is darker than any of us imagine. That man dared not meet my eye, although it was his place to hector and mine to quail. There was guilt in that look."

He was on his way westward. Since that meeting at the Badminton he had been much disturbed in his mind about his lost love. Fickle as the previous experience of his life had

proved him, he had not yet forgotten Helen. The year which Mrs. Baddeley had allowed for the duration of his passion was not yet ended, and it may be that the disappointment and mischance which had attended this particular intrigue had intensified his feelings. He would have forfeited ten years of his life to have found Helen and won her for his own; but there was that in her husband's countenance which chilled his soul. He had half a mind to follow Valentine Belfield, and tax him then and there with foul play. He had no evidence except the mystery of the wife's disappearance and that guilty look in the husband's face, but the two together brought conviction to St. Austell's mind.

CHAPTER XL.

THE FORLORN HOPE

Valentine Belfield walked to the furthest end of the platform and stood there, cold and sick, like a man in an ague fit, till his train came in from Plymouth, and then he had to run after the train as it steamed into the station, and scramble into a first-class compartment, panting and breathless, and white to the lips.

"You oughtn't to run things so close as that, sir. You don't look the kind of man who can stand it," said an elderly parson, one of those amiable busybodies who are always interested in other people's affairs.

Valentine scowled at him by way of answer, as he threw his deer-stalker into the rack, and mopped his forehead and hair, damp with icy sweat.

"A churlish personage," thought the parson; "something wrong with the heart, and a very irritable temper;" and the good man tried to interest himself in his newspaper, glancing over the top of it every now and then to see if there were any hope of conversation.

Valentine put on his cap again, pulled it over his forehead, and coiled himself in the corner of the carriage in an attitude that meant total isolation. He was trying to recover his nerve after that sudden apparition of St. Austell.

"By——, I was afraid of the man," he said to himself. "For the first time in my life I have known what it is to fear the face of a man. If a brace of constables came to arrest me, warrant and handcuffs complete, I wouldn't flinch; but his face unnerved me. He loved her. He would ask me, 'What have you done

with your wife? What have you done with that frail, false girl, whose heart was mine?' Yes, his, *his*—not mine. It was *his* love I murdered. It is to *him* I am answerable. It was *his* life I spoiled. She had ceased to belong to me—she was openly, avowedly his. And I quailed before him, turned sick with fear at sight of the villain who wronged me."

For an hour and more he sat in his corner, living over that brief meeting on the platform, seeing that passing vision of a malignant face, telling himself again and again, in bitterest mockery, that is was St. Austell who had lost by that fatal blow. At last, and with a tremendous effort, he dismissed this dark train of thoughts, and his mind recurred to one of the objects of his journey to London.

Ever since his last meeting with Madge Darley, the girl and her mission had been present to his mind. Passion was dead in him, buried under the crushing weight of a great remorse, numbed and frozen as the senses are in a nightmare. There was no rekindling of an old flame; but in the ashes of his dead love for that strange girl there was a faint glow, a little spot of warmth, where all else had grown cold. He yearned for her presence, for the sound of her voice, for the touch of her hand. He felt that if there could be comfort or hope for him anywhere upon this earth it would be with her. He felt that if there were any one to whom he could confess his crime, it was Madge Darley, and not a priest.

"The Forlorn Hope," he repeated to himself as he sat in his corner, looking out at the landscape: every field, and copse, and hill, and curving stream familiar to him from his boyhood; beheld again and again at all seasons, sometimes in listless vacuity, sometimes in feverish impatience.

At last the train steamed into Paddington Station on the edge of dusk. The sunset glowed red athwart the London fog as the train passed Harrow and Hanwell. The great vaulted roof of the terminus looked sepulchral in the chilly light of electric lamps.

Valentine told a porter to take his portmanteaux to the Great Western Hotel, and then left the station on foot. He was going to Lisson Grove to look for the Refuge founded by Madge Darley.

The long thoroughfare of the Grove was light with gaslit shops, and full of traffic. Valentine inquired in one of the shops, and was directed to a side street—a dismal-looking street of shabby, dilapidated houses, which might have had pretensions to respectability half a century ago, but which had fallen to about the lowest stage in the history of bricks and mortar. They were twelve-roomed houses, however, and afforded accommodation to a considerable population, as appeared by the

various lighted windows, suggestive of several domiciles under one roof.

Across the front of one of these houses, of a somewhat better aspect than its neighbours, appeared a long black board on which the words, "The Forlorn Hope," were painted in large white letters. In front of the fanlight there was a lamp with the words "Refuge for Homeless Women and Girls," in black letters, on the glass. There was no possible mistake as to the motive and character of this institution.

The door swung open at Valentine's touch, and as he crossed the threshold a woman in a black gown and white cap came out of the parlour next the street, and met him in the passage.

It was Madge Darley. The shepherdess was always ready to receive the lost sheep. The fold was humble and unattractive, but it meant what it offered—shelter.

She started at sight of a tall man in a fur-bordered coat—started again on recognizing Valentine.

"Mr. Belfield!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. I told you I should come to you some day, Madge, and you promised not to shut your door in my face."

"I am not likely to do that; but I don't think you will want to stay very long in this house."

She led the way into the parlour, a plainly furnished room, lighted by a cheap paraffin lamp, under a green shade.

A tall press, made of pitch pine, occupied either side of the fireplace. The table was of varnished deal, the walls were whitewashed, the floor was uncarpeted, and half a dozen rush-bottomed chairs completed the furniture of the room; but all was scrupulously neat and clean. A fire burned cheerily in the shining grate, and an open-work brass fender made one point of brightness in the picture. A large iron kettle was singing on the old-fashioned hob.

"Pray sit down," said Madge, pointing to a chair opposite her own. "You have an idle hour to spare, I suppose, and you have come to see our Refuge—to find out for yourself whether we are doing good work—in order that you may help us."

She spoke gravely, faltering a little, more deeply moved by his presence in that place than she would have cared to own to herself. The lesson of her life for nearly four years had been the lesson of forgetfulness; but it was not yet learned. His presence had still the power to awaken an unreasoning gladness, to give life a new colour.

"No, Madge; I am no philanthropic philanderer. I confess to caring very little whether your work of mercy thrive or fail. I am here from pure selfishness. I am eaten up by my own cares; my own burden is too heavy for me; and of late, night and day, I am devoured by one thought, one hope——"

He stopped suddenly, looking at her with eyes that shone feverishly bright in his haggard face, with one strong hand clenched upon the table between them.

"The Forlorn Hope, Madge," he said in a low voice, after a few moments' silence, "the hope that you will pity me when no one else in this world, except my brother, can pity me, knowing all. Yes, that you, knowing my sin, might still pity me—might still love me."

He flung himself on his knees at her feet. He seized her hand and covered it with kisses, despairing kisses, which moved her more than his passion of days gone by had ever moved her, fondly as she had loved the tempter.

She snatched her hand from him indignantly, looking at him in angry surprise.

"I thought you knew me better than to talk to me in the old strain," she said. "I thought I had shown you that I am not the kind of woman to be tempted by a fine gentleman lover—to be tempted now, after I have given my life to the saving of weaker women. Do you think that I am likely to forget that you are another woman's husband—and that when you were free you refused to marry me?"

"I was a fool, Madge, a self-opinionated idiot. I did not know that you were the one woman upon this earth who could have made my life happy—who might have influenced me for good. I was bound round by petty prejudices, by bigoted belief in birth and position. What are birth and position when weighed against the nobility of such a nature as yours? I saw in you only a beautiful peasant, whom it was my business, as a gentleman, to seduce. And when I saw that your resistance was real and earnest, I lost my temper, and fancied myself in love with another woman. It was pique that made me Helen Deverill's lover."

He shuddered as he pronounced his wife's name.

"That is all past and done with," said Madge gravely. "I am very sorry that your marriage ended unhappily; but there is a long life before you yet, I hope, and there must be something for you to do in it. And now I must see after my patients. It is tea-time. Shall I make you a cup of tea?"

She went to one of the presses, opened it, and began to take out cups and saucers, and little crockery teapots, and trays, and plates. Everything was of the cheapest, but the things had been chosen for their prettiness, and the little trays had a neat and dainty look as those active hands arranged them, each with its spotless linen d'oyley.

"Yes, please. I should relish a cup of cold water from your hand. And my mouth is parched and full of dust after my

journey. Think of me as the worst of your patients. Have you many in the house?"

"Every bed is full except one. There is a girl of nineteen in the next room, dying. If you could hear her story you would know what misery means."

She was moving to and fro between the press and the fireplace, filling her little teapots from the big copper kettle as she talked to him.

"I need not wait for that. I know the meaning of misery."

"Ah, but not of such misery as she has suffered, a girlhood that has been one long degradation. Think of what it was for that girl to awaken to the first consciousness of life in the midst of such surroundings as decent lips dare not name; to have been so reared as not to know the meaning of sin till she was steeped in it, blackened by it, dying of it. That is her history."

"She is what you call an interesting case, I suppose."

"She is one among many. Old and young come here every day, pleading for a corner to die in. That is about all we can give yet awhile."

"You have done a good deal, I think, in establishing such a refuge."

"People are so kind. The poor have helped me as much as the rich. Those who have had no money to give have brought me little presents out of their household goods, at a sacrifice. This copper kettle was given by a widow who goes out charing. It was a legacy from a butcher's wife whom she had served for years. 'It is too good for me, Sister,' she said. 'Any little tin tea-kettle will do to make my cup of tea.' She kissed the lid of the kettle before she handed it to me, for love of her dead mistress."

She set one of the tea-trays before him, with a little plate of bread and butter, such as she had been cutting for her patients. She rang a bell, and a woman of about forty came into the room, dressed in a grey merino gown and a white cap and apron. She looked like a lady, but she was very thin and gaunt, with a pale pinched face and a sad smile. She looked surprised at finding a stranger seated by the hearth. "Sister Angela, Mr. Belfield," said Madge, by way of introduction. "Mr. Belfield is good enough to be interested in our work, Sister." Angela bowed, but made no reply. The two women took half a dozen of the little trays between them, and went away to attend to their patients, leaving Valentine to stare into the fire and brood over his past life.

He thought of those careless days on the river, with boat and dog and gun: the sheer idleness of fancy which had led him to Madge Darley's cottage the hold her beauty had taken of him,

and his scornful disbelief in her virtue. And he now came to this woman in his agony, as the one woman who could give him help and comfort, whose strong brave soul could inspire him with courage to begin life anew. And having come into this house of pain, he felt as if it would be best of all to stay here for ever, to be her clerk, her helper, her drudge, only to have the privilege of being near her. He half forgot his scheme of distant travel; he was ready to grovel at her feet and plead to be allowed to stay with her.

She was absent for more than an hour. He emptied the teapot, and looked at his watch a dozen times before she came back.

"Are you surprised to see me here still?" he asked.

"Yes; I thought you would have gone back to your hotel. This is not a place for you."

"I suppose not; yet you told me if I were in distress I might come to you for shelter. I hoped to find the name of your house was not altogether a delusion—The Forlorn Hope. I have no other hope, Madge."

"That cannot be true. You have your mother, who adores you."

"My mother cannot help me to bear my burden. It would blast her declining years, bring her in anguish to the grave, to know all my misery. I want some strong bosom to lean upon; I want some heroic soul to inspire me with courage. Madge, I have come to you—to you, as the only woman who can shed a ray of light upon this darkened spirit. I am a viler sinner than any of your lost sheep. Have pity upon me if you can, Madge, for I am the kind of sinner whom no one pities. I am a murderer."

He clasped her hand in both his own, and drew her nearer to him, looking up at her with despairing eyes, as she stood looking down upon him, speechless with horror.

"I killed my wife."

"Oh, God!"

"I had the confession of her falsehood in my hand, her declaration that she had ceased to love me, and that she was passionately in love with another man—that she was leaving me to be his mistress. A pleasant letter for a husband to read, Madge. The ink was wet upon the paper, and she stood there looking at me—beautiful—false to the core. I struck her to the ground. It was only one blow, but it killed her. Between the reading of that letter and her death there was but an interval of half a dozen seconds. The ink was wet still, and she was lying at my feet looking up at me—dead."

"It was horrible," gasped Madge, "an awful, irreparable calamity—but not murder. You did not mean to kill her."

"I will not say as much as that. I think I wanted to kill her—as I would have killed her seducer had he been there—but I was sorry the instant she was dead. The agony of remorse began before that ink was dry."

"You should have confessed the truth; you should have braved all consequences."

"I should. I was a coward and a fool; a craven, to shrink from the consequences of my wrath. I had a right to be angry. I forgot how frail a thing she was. She fell like a lily—a tall white lily snapped in a storm. One moment—my passion had vented itself—and she was dead."

And then he went on to describe that ghastly burial of the dead, in the silence of the summer night. He dwelt on every detail, showing how vividly every circumstance of that dismal scene had painted itself upon his memory. He recalled these things shudderingly, as a man relates a bad dream which he has dreamed again and again.

"Did no one suspect you?"

"No one has found me out. There is a man I suspect of being some kind of eavesdropper and spy—a man who is on a visit to her father, and who passes for a gentleman."

"You must not lose an hour in getting away from England—from Europe—beyond the reach of pursuit, if that be possible. Suspicion once aroused, detection might be easy, and then, having hidden your crime, you might seem a deliberate murderer instead of the victim of a moment's passion. You must sail by the first ship that can carry you. Go to Liverpool to-night by the mail—if Liverpool is the port—and start to-morrow morning."

"I am in no hurry."

"But if your secret were once suspected, to leave England then would look like flight, and only confirm suspicion. Go at once, while you are free to go."

"I have half a mind to stay and take my chance," he answered thoughtfully. "If you would be kind to me, Madge—if you would let me spend an hour in this room sometimes, hear the sound of your voice, watch you coming in and going out, I would rather stay in London than go to Africa to look for diamonds and shoot big game. I am not the man I was before that night, Madge. When—when I had done that deed, my first thought was to save my neck—to hide my crime and go scot-free. I thought life would be the same as it had been—the hunting-field—the race-course—the battue—all the same. I thought I could forget. But when the seasons came round again, and the old sports, and the old people—my God, what a change! All the zest was gone. I went about as if I was in a dream, only half conscious of my own existence or the life round

me. Wherever I went, the same haunting thoughts went with me, and a ghost that would not be laid. Oh, Madge, you are stronger than I—braver, nobler. Pity me if you can, as the strong should pity the weak."

"I do pity you, poor soul, with all my heart," she answered softly.

She bent over him and kissed his burning forehead. For the first time in their lives her lips touched him in love, freely given.

"God bless you, Madge, for that kiss," he faltered. "It shows me that you can pity me. Oh, my love, don't banish me. Let me stay near you—always. Let me serve you as a slave serves his master. Let me wear a suit of fustian and corduroy, and carry coals and clean windows for you—until you have tried me by years of faithful service, if you like. God knows I will be patient in consideration of the wretch I am; and then when you have found that there is some good in me, let me be your husband, and let us go away together to the other end of the world. If there is happiness for me upon this earth, it must be found with you."

She looked at him in silence, with a slow, sad smile, for some moments before she answered.

"That is all a dream, Mr. Belfield, a feverish dream of your poor sick soul. I have my duty here, which I shall never leave; and you have your duty to yourself, and to your mother and brother. Think how their lives would be darkened if you were brought to answer for your crime, and made to appear that which you were not—a deliberate murderer. For their sake you ought to get away while the coast is clear. Begin a new life in a new country. Find new duties, as I found mine when my life was most desolate; and in doing your duty and saving the souls of sinners, you may find atonement for your own sin. And then the shadows will be lifted, the burden will be lessened, the light will come."

"I cannot live without you, Madge. I have yearned for you in my misery. That kiss has sealed me as your own for ever."

"If you persist in saying these things, I will never see you again, Mr. Belfield. I have done with all thoughts of love. I have planned out my path in life, and mean to keep to it. And now I must wish you good-night, and ask you to leave this house. I have a great deal to do before bedtime."

"Cannot other people do it for you? Cannot you give one evening in your life to my despair—you who do so much for others?"

"I am the head of our little organization, and have to see that all is done rightly. There are three-and-twenty sick or ailing girls and women in the house, and only three Sisters beside

myself to see to them. We are a sisterhood of twenty-two. I am the only permanent resident. The other twenty-one each give one day and night in every week to the work. They come at eight one evening and go away at eight on the following evening. It is one day taken from the week of worldly business for a work of mercy. We find the plan answer better than many resident sisterhoods. The Sisters are more cheerful, better-tempered, and in better health. Their lives are not monotonous. There is no weariness, no pining for escape into the outer world. They always bring a certain amount of freshness to their work; and it makes them happy to know that, however worldly the rest of their lives may be, one day out of seven is spent in doing good."

"The plan is your invention, I suppose?"

"Yes, it is mine."

"Clear brain—strong heart! Why did I not know your value four years ago? Well, Madge, you have received me kindly. and I won't impose upon your kindness. Good-night. I shall come again to-morrow evening."

"Think better of it, and go to Liverpool by the night mail."

"Good-night," he repeated, ignoring her injunction.

"Good-night."

They clasped hands and parted. Scarcely had the outer door shut upon him, when she covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"Oh, my love, my sin-stained love!" she murmured; "I care for you more in your abasement than I ever cared for you yet. I would give my life to lead you back to happiness, if I had any hope you could ever be happy. But the curse of blood is on your soul, and what hope can there be for you on this side of the grave?"

CHAPTER XLI.

"IT WAS THE BRAND OF CAIN"

Mrs. Baddeley was very tired of the River Chad, and of the rustic garden where the crocuses starred the lawn with their golden cups. It was all very rural and fresh and innocent, but she had an aching void where her heart should have been, and longed for London dissipations as the only anodyne for care. The good kind fellow, whom she had talked of so cheerily last season while he was broiling under an Indian sun, was on

his way home now; and she could not think without some uneasiness of the manner in which he would take things when he should arrive, good-natured as he was.

It is not a pleasant thing for a husband to come home and find a sheaf of bills, and lawyers' letters, and County Court summonses awaiting him, or to find his household gods subject to a bill of sale held by a West-end dressmaker; and this was exactly the condition of affairs that awaited Major Baddeley.

He was to leave Bombay in February, and now February and the crocuses were waning, and in all probability the Major had started.

"I shall get a telegram from Aden before I know where I am," said the anxious wife. "I think I ought to go back to London, dad."

"You can at least stay till you get your telegram."

Mrs. Baddeley signed, yawned, and resumed her novel. The romances supplied by Mudie were her only resources in this sleepy country life. She, who in London seldom opened a book, devoured three volumes in a day.

"Poor Frank! How I wish somebody would leave him a fortune!" she said, with her eyes on the page. "He would be such a perfect husband if he had only three or four thousand a year. How long is your friend Mr. Melnotte to stay with us?"

"Does he bore you?"

"Not at all. He is very inoffensive, and he plays écarté with you of an evening; but I can't quite understand why you asked him here."

"There is more in him than anybody supposes," replied the Colonel. "I like his conversation, and, if you are going to desert me, I shall keep him as long as I can."

Leo yawned assent. The African traveller had not inspired the faintest interest in her thoroughly feminine breast. Her only idea of sport was a prettily shaped horse that went like the wind, and a perfectly fitting habit. Big game and the hardships of life in the desert did not engage her fancy.

After luncheon she went for a long ramble by the river, not because she loved the river or the landscape, but because she knew that open-air exercise was good for her figure and complexion.

Mr. Melnotte was out and about almost all day. He seemed to be as keenly interested in rustic explorations and village gossip as in the perilous adventures of the desert. He made friends everywhere, talked to every one, and had a pleasant, homely way, which put every one at ease with him. He was out on the day after Valentine's departure, when Sir

Adrian called at Colonel Deverill's cottage early in the afternoon.

Adrian was shown into the drawing-room. Mrs. Baddeley was out walking, the butler told him, but the Colonel was at home.

The Colonel was not very prompt to appear, having lately settled himself in his armchair by the dining-room fire, to sleep off the effects of a heavy lunch and a pint of dry sherry. Adrian was left to himself for at least ten minutes, during which time he walked up and down the drawing-room restlessly, full of thought.

There was a small writing-table in one of the windows, and a chair in front of it, which looked as if it had been occupied that morning. On the table there was a pile of volumes with the label of the Royal Geographical Society upon all of them, and beside the books there was an inkstand and a blotter.

Sir Adrian had the curiosity to look at these books—Cameron, Livingstone, Stanley. They were all books of African travel. He opened one of the volumes at the places marked with slips of paper.

At each of the marked places he found an anecdote, and every one of those anecdotes had been recited by Mr. Melnotte at the Abbey dinner-table or in the Abbey billiard-room as personal adventures.

He opened another volume with the same result, and then another, in which there were more selected anecdotes which had not yet been related, stock-in-trade for future evenings.

"Valentine was right," he said to himself; "Melnotte is an impostor."

But why was the man there if an impostor? Colonel Deverill was not a man to be taken in by any common swindler. There must be some reason for the presence of this sham explorer.

Was there some hidden motive in his visit to the Colonel: some motive which involved danger in Valentine?

Adrian had been not a little perplexed by Colonel Deverill's choice of that river-side cottage as a winter residence; and now it seemed to him that Melnotte was a mysterious ally of the Colonel's, who had been brought there to act as a spy upon the inmates of the Abbey.

To suppose this was to suppose that Helen's father suspected the dark secret of his daughter's fate, and such a supposition was full of terror.

Colonel Deverill came into the room while Adrian was still standing by the table, with Cameron's book in his hand. He put it down as he went forward to greet the Colonel.

"Your friend Melnotte seems fond of reading other people's adventures," he said carelessly.

The Colonel glanced from his visitor to the books on the table, and at once accepted the situation.

"Yes, he is never so happy as when he has his nose in a volume of travels," he answered. "You are not looking over well, Adrian. What's the matter?"

"Oh, I am well enough."

"But a little anxious about your brother," pursued the Colonel, watching Sir Adrian's face as he spoke. "I met Mrs. Freemantle in my stroll this morning, and she told me you were all of you uneasy about Mr. Belfield, and that you wanted him to travel."

"Yes; he is out of health and out of spirits."

"Everybody has noticed the change in him. There has been a deeper gloom than husbands usually fall into under such circumstances. Most men take their troubles pretty lightly, now-a-days."

Adrian was silent.

"Have you succeeded in persuading your brother to try change of scene?"

"I hope so. There is nothing decided. Valentine is not given to allowing other people to manage his life. He went up to town yesterday to look about him."

"Oh, he has gone to London, has he? Where does he put up?"

"I really don't know. At the Great Western, most likely, if he took the train for Paddington. If he travelled by the other line, he may have gone to the Grand."

"You have not heard from him since he left?"

"No; he is not fond of letter-writing. He will telegraph if he has anything to communicate."

The conversation drifted to indifferent matters, but was far from lively. Colonel Deverill had a preoccupied air, and looked out of the window oftener than was natural to a well-mannered Irishman.

Adrian was rising to leave when the butler flung open the door and announced "Lord St. Austell."

"By Jove, this is an unexpected pleasure," said the Colonel; and before he could recover from his surprise, Sir Adrian passed St. Austell with the coldest possible salutation, nodded good-bye to his host, and departed.

"What brings you into this part of the world?" asked Colonel Deverill, when the door had shut upon Adrian.

"I want to know the result of Melnotte's investigations, and I was sick of waiting for letters. He has been very slow."

"Yes; he has been uncommonly slow. I can get nothing out of him. And now Belfield has given us the slip. If there has been foul play, he may be on his way to America by this

time—safe out of reach before we can move a step. He went up to London yesterday."

"I know he did," answered St. Austell. "I met him in the station at Exeter."

"You did? Strange."

"Yes, it was a strange meeting, for it confirmed my darkest suspicions. We met face to face, Deverill—met and passed each other; and if ever I saw the face of a murderer I saw it then."

"Bosh! Men don't wear the record of crime on their faces."

"This one wore it yesterday: it was the brand of Cain. He quailed at the sight of me, at me—his wife's lover, the man who blighted his married life. Why, if he had not been the greater sinner, he would have blazed up—flown at me like a tiger—tried to strangle me. Was it natural to turn livid and then pass on, pretending not to see me? Was that the conduct of the man whom I had wronged—who had the right to call me to account? No, Deverill; it was the manner of a wretch who knew himself a hundred times more guilty than I. It was the face of an assassin. And you and Melnotte have trifled with your chances, have let this murderer get clear off before you have discovered his crime."

"I do not think Melnotte has been idle; but I can get very little out of him. He is uncommonly close."

"Yes, that is a trick of the trade. I believe this one is really a clever fellow. He began life as a gentleman, and started in his present profession with the advantage of a university education. He was a man who might have done well in life, perhaps, if it had not been for an intrigue with a Belgian countess, which finished in a duel with her husband. He got a bullet in the hip which lamed him for life. They think highly of him at Scotland Yard, and he has been invaluable to me in two or three rather awkward affairs. But I don't like his letting things hang fire. He has been here long enough to arouse Belfield's suspicions. When do you expect him?"

"Any time between now and eight o'clock. He always dines with us, and if you can stay to dinner——"

"Of course I can stay. I came to Devonshire to find out what progress you were making. I cannot rest till I know the worst; and if there is a wrong to be avenged I shall never rest till vengeance has been done. I'll take a stroll and a smoke by the river, and then go back to the inn and dress. I shall be with you soon after seven, on the chance of getting some talk with Melnotte before dinner."

He left the Colonel free to resume his easy-chair by the dining-room fire, his newspapers, cigar, and afternoon sleep. Colonel Deverill was in the lowest spirits, full of vague dread, as

one upon the threshold of a ghastly revelation; but there are phases of physical comfort which can coexist with mental depression, and the Colonel went back to his fireside and his soft, warm chair, his brandy-and-soda and afternoon slumbers, as naturally as the dog goes to the hearthrug and coils himself round by the fender, even after he has been kicked.

St. Austell lighted his cigar and sauntered along by the river, shadowed now by woods that were leafless and hills that were bleak and bare. A heron came swooping over the tree-tops and down to the water's edge, and stood on one leg in a meditative attitude, waiting to spear the first unwary fish that swam near. The sky was grey and dull, but the air was mild. It was an atmosphere suggestive of idleness and languid emotions.

St. Austell followed the course of the Chad as far as the mouth of that tributary stream which flowed through the grounds of Belfield Abbey, but at this point he turned, and went along the narrow woodland path which led to those shrubberied walks where he had last seen Helen Belfield. It was summer then, and the foliage was dense and heavy, shutting out the world beyond that leafy solitude. Now all was bleak and bare, save where the conifers showed darkly green against the dull grey sky. He remembered every turn of the path by which they two had walked, he pleading, she listening, with drooping head and eyelids heavy with tears.

"I know she loved me," he told himself. "If she had lived she would have been mine. Or if she had made up her mind to throw me over, and live her life without me, she would not have left me in uncertainty about her fate, she would not have trifled with my love and tortured me for no purpose. She is dead, and that man has murdered her."

He was close to the spot where they had sat together under the willow upon that last afternoon. Yes, there was the cypress walk, and there below it, upon the edge of the stream, the great grey trunk of the willow slanting across the bank, and there the rustic bench upon which they had sat.

Some one was sitting there to-day—a woman in a fur coat, with just the same graceful, curving line of throat and shoulders, and small head with heavy coils of hair. His heart stood still at sight of that figure. It was she. She had been living at the Abbey all this time in hiding. She was there, almost within reach of his arms. In that one delirious moment he felt that he loved her as he had never loved woman yet, with an undying love.

She rose at the sound of his footsteps and came slowly forward to meet him, a black poodle by her side, shaking the silver bell on his collar as he ran. St. Austell's heart sank as

she drew nearer, with the bitterest disappointment he had ever felt in his life.

"Mrs. Baddeley, you have given me a crushing blow," he said slowly. "I took you for your sister."

"Poor Helen. You of all people ought least to expect to find her sitting here."

"You still believe that I was concerned in her disappearance?"

"I have not yet reconciled myself to any other idea."

"Would to God you were right, and that I knew where to find her. I am tortured by the belief that she was made away with by her husband."

And then he told Mrs. Baddeley of that chance encounter at Exeter, and of the conclusions he had drawn from Mr. Belfield's countenance.

"Is not that rather too strong an interpretation to put upon a disagreeable face?" said Leo dubiously. "Short of clairvoyance, I cannot understand your ground for such an idea."

"Call it clairvoyance, if you like—the clairvoyance of love. I know that, as I looked the man in the face, a hideous fancy flashed into my mind. That man is the murderer of my love. I shall never rest till I have solved the mystery of her fate. If she is alive, I will find her. If she is dead, I will find out how she died; and if there was foul play, her murderer shall not go unpunished."

Leonora Baddeley looked at him in silence for some moments, half in cynical disbelief, half in admiration. Had he but loved her with such a love as that, she would have counted the world well lost for his sake. He had sued to her and had been rejected, because she had loved the world's good word better than she loved him, and, perhaps still more, because she doubted the reality of his love. And then afterwards, when she saw his affections transferred to her sister—saw him ever so much more earnest in the pursuit of that newer fancy, she had discovered her own weakness, and that he was the one man whom she really loved. Tortured by jealousy, she found out how dear he had been to her—he whom she had treated so lightly, holding him at bay with careless speeches and silvery laughter, and all the polished arts of a coquette, as she had done with a cloud of meaner admirers. Only of late had she known what it was to love and have her love unreturned.

"You talk very big," she said, "but you have done nothing to solve the mystery."

"Directly, nothing; but through your father I hope to accomplish everything."

"My poor father. He is very unhappy about Helen."

"He will have to be still more unhappy, if her fate was as dreadful as I think."

"Poor father. It would be too hard upon him in his old age. But I cannot believe in this morbid fancy of yours. The mystery of my sister's disappearance has set us all imagining horrors. She is safe enough, I dare say—hiding herself somewhere, and not caring one little bit for our anxiety."

"If I could only think as much—if I could only hope as much," St. Austell answered gloomily.

They walked back towards the cottage together, talking very little, both of them serious and depressed. Mrs. Baddeley was far from being easy in her mind about her sister, although she affected to make light of St. Austell's fears.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE SECRET OF THE RIVER

It was ten o'clock, and Mrs. Baddeley was sitting by the drawing-room fire, with Tory and a novel for her only companions, while Lord St. Austell, Colonel Deverill, and Mr. Melnotte remained in the snug little dining-room. St. Austell and the Colonel sat on each side of the fire, with their faces in shadow. Melnotte was at the table, in the bright light of the moderator lamp, with a note-book in his hand, to which he referred now and again in the course of his narrative or statement.

"You think I have been slow, Lord St. Austell," he said, "and that by my dilatory way of going to work I have lost my man. All I can say is that I don't think I have lost my man, and that this was a case in which precipitate action would have been fatal. I had to be sure of my facts before I took any step in the open.

"The first thing to be done was to find out how, and when, and with whom, Mrs. Belfield left the Abbey on the night on which she was supposed to have run away; or whether she ever left the Abbey at all. A long and careful investigation, involving the cross-examination of every official at the station and every fly-driver in Chadford, convinced me that she did not leave the Abbey on that night, or on the following morning, or on any subsequent occasion. From the hour when she wrote that letter of which Colonel Deverill informed me she was never seen by mortal eye; unless it was by Sir Adrian, or his mother, or Mr. Belfield.

"I have a knack of getting friendly with people upon a very slight pretence, and I contrived to get on friendly terms with Lady Belfield's housekeeper, Mrs. Marrable, an admirable old woman, and as easy to manage as a child; a devoted servant, and loyal to the backbone; but an incorrigible prattler. All she wanted was a pretext for prattling, and I found one for her. I called one afternoon when the family were out, and asked, as if in sheer frivolity, to see the old oak panelling, and the carved banister rails in the gallery over the hall. If Mrs. Marrable would be kind enough to show me the upper floor, I should esteem it a favour, I said; and as I had given the grey-haired footman half-a-crown when I dined at the Abbey, he at once produced Mrs. Marrable.

"From Mrs. Marrable I ascertained that Mr. Belfield was not at the Abbey at the time of his wife's disappearance, and had not been there for months; that he did not come there until quite a week after that event, when he arrived late in the evening, and told his mother that he had lost money at York Races and had gone over to Paris for a few days to revive his spirits. Mrs. Marrable was certain that he said he had been in Paris. It was a way with him before he was married to go off to Paris at an hour's warning, and she wondered what attraction there could be in such a place for a young English gentleman.

"Having ascertained from this good soul that Mr. Belfield had *not* been at the Abbey on the night of August the 19th, my next business was to ascertain from other people that he *had* been there on that particular night. I had made myself pretty sure of that fact from the porter who took his ticket at Chadford Station, before I saw my good Marrable; I made myself surer afterwards when I called at the Station Hotel and heard how Mr. Belfield had arrived by the midnight train, and had ordered a fly to take him to the Abbey, how pleasantly he had chatted in the bar while the fly was being got ready, and how he had dismissed the carriage half-way down the avenue, preferring to walk the rest of the way.

"This was point number two in my case. It was clear that Mr. Belfield had made a secret visit to the Abbey after midnight, at a time when he was supposed to be at York or in Paris.

"The next thing was to discover how he contrived to disappear from the neighbourhood without having been observed at Chadford Station. I had found a fairly intelligent porter and a worthy station-master at that station, and from these two I had satisfied myself that neither Mr. Belfield nor his wife had left Chadford by train, up or down the line, after the night of August the 19th.

"To discover Mr. Belfield's manner of getting away from the neighbourhood cost me some time; but eventually I traced

him to Bideford, where he must have gone on foot, a thirty-mile walk, and where at three o'clock on the afternoon of August 20th he chartered a sailing boat, in which he went round the coast to Bude, where he dismissed the boat. I took the trouble to go to Bude, and heard of him there, where he was out fishing all day, the innkeeper told me, and seemed strange in his manner. He stayed only four days, and then left in the coach for Launceston. He was not known at Bude by name, and he had no luggage, except a new night-shirt, brush and comb, which he had evidently bought on his arrival. The day on which he left Bude was the date which Mrs. Marrable had mentioned for his return from the supposed visit to Paris. The Bideford boatman described him as dead beat when he chartered the boat. He laid himself down at the bottom of the stern, on an old rug, and slept till sunset, but it was a very disturbed sleep, and the boatman thought he had something on his mind. They were coasting for nearly three days, the wind being against them part of the time, and the gentleman hardly ate anything, but finished a bottle of brandy which had been got for him at Bideford.

"What did this look like except the conduct of a criminal? Then comes his arrival at the Abbey, and the lie about a visit to Paris.

"Having got as far as this, I had not the slightest doubt that there had been a crime committed at the Abbey that night, or, in plain words, that Mr. Belfield murdered his wife. He got wind of her falsehood somehow, came home, and taxed her with it—there was a row, and he killed her. But how he killed her, and how he disposed of the body, are two questions which I have yet to solve."

Colonel Deverill groaned aloud, as he sat leaning forward in his chair, but he did not utter a word.

"He may have hidden her somewhere in that great barrack of a house," said St. Austell, "or he may have buried her in the garden."

"It would not be easy to hide a corpse in the largest house; nor easy to dig a grave between midnight and morning in the summer time, such a grave as should not be obvious to every eye. The one safe hiding-place would be the river; but that is more than a quarter of a mile from the house, at the nearest point."

"Why not drag the river?" asked St. Austell.

"I mean to get it done; but your lordship must remember that it is only within the last few days I succeeded in finding the Bideford boatman, and that it was his description of his passenger's appearance and conduct which confirmed my suspicion of foul play. There is such a thing as instinct; but one

must have some better justification than instinct before taking active steps in a business of this kind."

"It is the fault of your tribe," said St. Austell. "You are all over-cautious. This man bears the brand of Cain on his forehead."

"You are right there. He has the criminal manner distinctly marked. I saw that when I spent an evening in his mother's house, and I was almost as certain then as I am now that he made away with his wife."

"When can we get the river dragged?" asked the Colonel.

"To-morrow at daybreak," answered Melnotte. "I have engaged a couple of men to do it. They know *what* they are to search for, but they will keep their counsel, and tell any curious inquirers that I dropped a valuable watch into the stream yesterday afternoon when I was rowing. I hired a boat at the bridge yesterday and rowed up the Chad and along the Abbey river; and in this place, where everything is known that concerns other people's business, that fact is sure to be known. The men will begin to drag at a point that I shall indicate to them nearest to the Abbey, and work down stream for a quarter of a mile—then go back to the same point and work up stream. If the body was thrown into the river, it will be found within those limits."

"What if that final evidence be found? The murderer will have had time to get out of reach of justice before a coroner's inquest can bring his crime to light," said St. Austell.

"He will not leave the country very easily. All the principal ports are being watched."

"But what of the smaller ports? He will get away, if he wants to escape."

"I don't believe he intends flight," said the Colonel. "Sir Adrian's manner was natural enough this afternoon when he talked of his brother having gone up to town, and the possibility of his travelling sooner or later. He has held his ground so long that I see no reason why he should take fright now."

"Unless he smells a rat and suspects Melnotte," said St. Austell.

The late winter dawn found St. Austell awake, in his old-fashioned four-post bed at the hotel by Chadford Bridge. He had been tossing about all night, sleepless, save for brief snatches of half-unconsciousness, which were rather waking dreams than sleep. Not for one instant of that weary night had Helen's image been absent from his thoughts. Again, and again, and again he had lived over their last meeting—recalling her looks and tones—her reluctant yielding to his prayers—and then her final promise, solemnly given, that she would be his.

He remembered how he had stood by her side with her hand clasped in his, and had said to her: "This promise makes you mine for ever, love. There must be no going back from your words to-day. To me it is a pledge as solemn as was ever made before the altar. May the worst evil happen to me if I ever fall away from my fidelity to you."

He had spoken in good faith; and now in his despair he told himself that this was the crowning love of his life, and that if she had lived he would have been true to her to the end.

"She was beautiful enough to enslave a man for a lifetime," he said to himself. "She had spirit enough to make her a difficult conquest; she was just clever enough to be a delightful companion for a clever man. She was the one perfect woman whom I have known."

He rose at daybreak, worn out by sleeplessness, and tried to refresh himself with an ice-cold bath. The house was early astir in the hunting season, and there was a great cry for baths and boots, and a hurrying to and fro of chambermaids in the corridor, by the time St. Austell was dressed. His breakfast was ready in the pretty sitting-room looking on to the road and the river at eight o'clock, but he was no better able to eat than he had been to sleep. He sat staring at the fire, and sipping a cup of tea, while he pictured to himself what the men were doing in the Abbey river.

He had intended to be down there at daybreak and to watch them at their work from the beginning. He had thought about it all night; but when the morning light came, his courage failed him. It was all too ghastly. How would death have used her, his beloved, she whose smile was to have been his Aurora, who was to have looked upon him in the happy dawn, in the glad beginning of each new day? How would she have fared in that cold couch where they were seeking her? For the first time since his boyhood he prayed with all the strength and fervour of a believer—forgetting his scepticism, his sociology, his pessimism—everything, except the mental agony which wrung that prayer from him. He prayed that the men with the drags might not find her. That she might still be living—lost to him, perhaps, but living and lovely as she had been when last he looked upon her face.

The men must have been at work for more than an hour by this time, and it would take him nearly an hour to walk to the Abbey river; yet still he sat idly staring at the fire, hesitating, reluctant to face the result of that loathsome work. At last, with an effort, he rose from his armchair, put on his coat, and went out.

There were three young men starting for a distant meet as he left the hotel. They went clattering over the bridge, lighting

their cigars, and talking and laughing, full of inane jocosity, as it seemed to St. Austell. He almost hoped that one of them would be killed before they came back in the evening. He execrated them for their mirthful ineptitude, as they went jogging up the stony hill, slapping their horses' haunches and swaggering in their saddles. He was glad to get away from the old English town, and its fringe of modern villas, to the lonely high road, and then to the footpath across the park, to that tributary of the Chad which was called the Abbey river, a stream in which many a fat and placid lay-brother had fished with net or line, and placed his eel-baskets, in the good old monkish days. St. Austell went down into the deep glen through which the river ran, parallel with the railroad. He went by the same narrow path which he had trodden last August, under the heavy summer foliage. Now the boughs were bare, and the winter sky looked coldly blue behind the dark tracery of leafless twigs. He saw the scene as in a dream, the wind-swept hillocks and hollows, the great brown trunks of the oaks, and in the distance the bright river glancing here and there across an opening in the woodland. He went down to the path where he had met Mrs. Baddeley yesterday afternoon. There was no one in sight, nor could he hear the sound of the irons scraping along the pebble bed. If the men were still at work, they were out of earshot. He walked slowly along, hoping that all was over, and that nothing had been found; but a little further on he met Melnotte, and the first glance at his face told St. Austell that there had been a ghastly discovery.

"What are you doing here, Lord St. Austell?" said Melnotte hurriedly. "Pray go back. The worst has happened, and you ought not to be seen here. It may do you harm by-and-by. Take my advice and get away from this neighbourhood as soon as you can."

"What have they found? Where?" asked St. Austell, ignoring his advice.

"They have found a body in a deep pool further down the stream; it is hers—there are ample means of recognition. The long brown hair, a wedding-ring and keeper, a Persian rug wound round with a silk handkerchief. If her murderer had taken pains to secure her identification, and to show that she did not throw herself into the river, but was thrown in by somebody else, he could not have done more. Yes, it is very sad, my lord," as if in answer to the agony in St. Austell's countenance, "but there is no help. It is all over and done with. It is only what I expected. What you have to do is to get away from Chadford before the inquest, and to keep your name out of the business, if you can. You are known to have been with her on the last day of her life, to have planned an elope-

ment with her. You may be suspected of her murder—who knows?"

"I don't care whether I am or not. Where is she? Let me see her," said St. Austell, trying to pass Melnotte, who contrived to block the path.

"For God's sake don't go that way. The men are carrying their burden to the dead-house. Let no one who loved her look upon her—let no one but the surgeon see all that death and the river have left of poor humanity. Come back to Chadford with me, Lord St. Austell. I am going to the Coroner."

"What of her murderer? Is he to escape you?"

"Not if I can help it. I shall telegraph to Scotland Yard before I see the Coroner; and when I have seen him I shall get a magistrate's warrant for Mr. Belfield's arrest, and I shall take the first train for London with the warrant in my pocket."

"Sir Adrian will have communicated with his brother in the meantime, perhaps. Does he know what has happened?"

"Not yet I think. There was no one down by the river while the men were at work except a gamekeeper, and I told him my story of having dropped my watch into the stream, which he seemed to swallow easily enough. I don't think Sir Adrian can have heard anything yet; but there will be plenty of talk, I suppose, when the remains have been taken to the dead-house."

Lord St. Austell looked back along the river path. He saw the men in the distance carrying their burden on a light hand-bier, which they must have taken with them from the dead-house, in expectation of this ghastly result. The burden was covered with a tarpaulin, and they were walking slowly in the same direction as St. Austell and Melnotte, only a good way behind.

He made no further attempt to see what lay beneath yonder gruesome covering; indeed he felt that Melnotte was right, and that he would not for worlds have looked upon those poor relics of all that he had loved. Let not that horrible image come between him and his memory of her fresh young beauty: let him not be reminded through her of what he himself must be—of humanity's common doom. He walked back to the town almost in silence, and left the detective to do his work alone. Melnotte suggested that he should go to the cottage and break the news to Colonel Deverill; but this St. Austell refused.

"I can help no man to bear his burden," he said; "my own is too heavy for me."

It was part of his burden to know that his unholy love had been the cause of Helen Belfield's death. If her husband was the murderer, it was her lover who had brought about the crime.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"LET ME BE YOUR SERVANT"

VALENTINE BELFIELD did not go to the Great Western Hotel after he left the house in Lisson Grove. He was too deeply agitated to go quietly back to his hotel, and eat a good supper and drink a bottle of wine and go to bed and rest. He knew that sleep was impossible, unless he could bring it about by sheer fatigue, as he had done when he walked from the Abbey to Bideford and had slept the sleep of exhaustion in the bottom of the little sailing boat. His only chance to-night was to walk down the demon of restlessness that was in him; so he turned his face northward and walked to Hampstead, and then struck off towards Finchley and Hendon, and roamed about among fields and lanes all night, and at seven o'clock breakfasted at a little public-house by the side of a canal, somewhere between Finchley Road and Child's Hill. It was a house chiefly affected by bargemen, and nobody took any particular notice of him, the barmaid merely remarking that in all probability he was a swell who had been on the drink last night, and had been walking about to sober himself. He was sober enough this morning evidently, and was proof against all the barmaid's blandishments, though she took her hair out of papers before she carried him his breakfast of eggs and bacon and strong tea.

He had eaten nothing yesterday except the dainty little plate of bread and butter supplied by Madge, and he was faint and sick from the unaccustomed fast.

He fell asleep by the fire in the public-house parlour, slept through the entrances and exits of several relays of bargemen, slept amidst the odour of beer and the jingle of pewter pots, dozed on till the afternoon, and then paid his score and went away. He walked across the fields to the Edgware Road, and thence to Lisson Grove, where he went into a slopseller's shop and bought a suit of such clothes as are worn by the lower order of working men—an Oxford shirt, corduroy trousers, fustian jacket, and hob-nailed boots. He changed his clothes on the premises, and reappeared in Lisson Grove in corduroy and fustian, leaving his own things to be kept till called for. The shopman wondered not a little at this transformation.

"It's a lark, sir, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, it's a lark," answered Mr. Belfield, as he walked out of the shop.

"Well, I must say that I never laid eyes on a less larky-

looking gent to be up to such a move as that," said the young Israelite to his fellow-shopman, as he put Mr. Belfield's clothes away.

"There's a lady at the bottom of it, I make no doubt, Benjamin," replied the other, dismissing the subject, which remark was more accurate than speculative observations are wont to be.

It was dusk when Mr. Belfield rang the bell at the Forlorn Hope. Madge opened the door and did not recognize him, as he stood facing her silently, with his back to the light.

"What do you want, my good man?"

"I want to be your servant, as I told you last night."

"Mr. Belfield, why are you still hanging about here?" cried Madge, in an agonized tone. "This is sheer madness."

"I believe it is next door to madness," answered Valentine, following her into the parlour, "but it is madness that only you can cure. There's no use in my going abroad, Madge, without you. I should only carry my guilty conscience and my misery with me; go where I might—Africa, Asia, the North Pole—it would be all the same to me. There is no place so strange, no life so full of danger, excitement, occupation, that would make me forget. You have the power to comfort me. You have the power to lay the ghost that haunts me. You alone can tell me that I have repented and have expiated my sin. You have the faith that moves mountains, and by your faith I may be saved. Leave me to myself and I shall perish inevitably. There is no help, no cure, but through you."

"You are mad," she said. "Yes, it is all madness. I have a good work to do here, and I cannot leave it."

"Let me stay here then, and work for you. That is what I have come for: to be your drudge, your slave; to be what Caliban was to Prospero. I am dressed for the part, you see. You will find how handy I can make myself, cleaning windows and scrubbing flag-stones, doing work that you and the Sisters cannot do, with all your willingness to toil. And in bad cases, when a patient wants watching at night, I can do my part as a watch-dog. You don't know what I can be under your transforming power. Madge, I have no friend in the world but you."

"You have your mother, a nearer and dearer friend."

"No. To my mother my life has been a lie. She only is my friend who knows my sin and my repentance. Let me stay here, Madge, and when I leave the country, go with me as my guardian angel and my wife. Test the truth of my repentance, if you will, before you trust me. See how changed a creature I have become: how all that is vilest in my nature has been burnt out of it in the furnace of remorse. Test me to the

uttermost as your servant, before you accept me as your husband."

Madge began to waver. He who was pleading to her knew not how urgently her own heart was pleading for him, how fondly she loved him, even in his degradation, stained with the shedding of blood.

"I believe it would be for your own safety to leave England instantly," she said. "There is no knowing what danger may arise. But if you are bent upon staying in this house and helping us in our work, I will talk to the Sisters and see what can be done. Our fortnightly committee meeting will be held to-morrow afternoon, and most of the Sisters will be here. If they consent to your being employed here—as a servant—I have no objection. There is a little room on this floor at the end of the passage, which you might have as a bedroom. It is small and rather dark, but it is dry and well ventilated."

"Give me any dog-hole," said Valentine. "Do you think I care how I am lodged? I want to be near you, Madge. I want to feel the support of your presence. That is all I ask."

"You must not call me Madge here. I am Sister Margaret."

"You shall be Sister Margaret, until you are wife Margaret. And now order me about, let me begin my slavery. Give me any work there is to be done."

"I don't think there is anything you can do to-night, but you shall clean all the windows to-morrow, if you like. Our windows have always been an affliction to me. We have done our best, but women are not good as window-cleaners. To-night you can take a holiday, but on future evenings we can give you some penmanship to do for us, letters to charitable people who help us. What must we call you, by-the-by? You have a second Christian name, I think?"

"Yes. I was christened John Valentine, but I was always called by the second name, because my mother preferred it."

"Then here we will call you John."

She began to prepare the tea, as she had done on the previous evening, and two of the Sisters came in to fetch the trays for their patients. One was an elderly woman, the other a girl of two-and twenty, a pale gentle-looking creature, with a wistful expression in her large blue eyes.

Madge introduced Valentine to them as Mr. John, a person who in the outside world had been a gentleman, but who offered himself to them as a servant.

"If all the Sisters approve, I think we may keep him here and find him very useful," she said. "At any rate he will stay here for to-night, and he can help you both in carrying round the coal-scuttles after tea."

Sister Agnes, the fair girl, sat down to tea with Madge and

Valentine. She had a nervous manner, and spoke rarely, but Valentine was interested in her appearance, and inquired her history by-and-by, when she had gone back to her duties on the upper floor.

"Hers is a sad story. She belongs to wealthy people, and three years ago her life was a round of gaiety. She fell in love with an army doctor, and her family were all opposed to the match, and made her break off her engagement. He went to Egypt and was killed in the Soudan. She heard of his death unexpectedly from her partner at a dance, and for six months afterwards she was out of her mind. When she recovered, nothing would induce her to resume her old life of fine clothes and parties, nothing would induce her to hear of another lover. She devotes her life to charitable work, and all the money her father gives her is given to the poor. He is very liberal to her, although he disapproves of her way of life. She spends only one day of every week in this house, but she works for us out of doors, going about the streets at night, and talking to wretched women whom few girls of her age would have the courage to approach. That fragile-looking girl has penetrated the darkest alleys about Clare Market, the most dangerous streets in Ratcliff Highway, where even the police go at the risk of their lives. She has never suffered any harm, has hardly ever been insulted by a coarse word. She has done more good than any other member of our sisterhood, although all have worked well."

"She can take your place when you have gone to the other side of the world, Madge."

Madge shook her head, with a sad, serious look, full of pity.

"I shall never leave my work, Mr. Belfield. I have given myself to it as much as if I had taken a vow. I am very sorry for you, I would do much to befriend you or to be of use to you, but I have put my hand to the plough, and I shall never take it away."

Valentine got up and began to pace the room, fuming.

"It is madness," he exclaimed; "a woman's craze. Only a woman would ever think of such a thing. Are there not hospitals for sick women?"

"There are hospitals for disease, but there are no hospitals for the weak and ailing, there are very few refuges for fainting sinners. There are plenty of orphanages for the spotless children, but there are few havens for the girls lost in the dawn of girlhood. Christ loved the innocent children and called them to his knees; but he had inexhaustible pity for the fallen women."

"So be it. You have set the ball rolling. You have begun the work. Others can carry it on."

"I will not leave it to others."

"You can continue your good work in the Antipodes. You will find sin in the New World as well as in the Old. There is

no colony so recently founded that Satan has not helped to people it. Come, Madge, be reasonable. Three years ago you spurned me because I dared to approach you as a seducer. You did well, and I deserved your contempt. Now I come to you in all honour; I offer you all I have to give—my name, my life, my fortune, such as it is. I am to inherit all my mother's property, and I shall not be a poor man. I come to you with a blemished life, stained with one hour of darkest sin. But I am not altogether vile. I have repented that fatal hour in the long agony of months. I shall repent it all my life. Only you can make that life tolerable; only you can heal my wounds. Be my wife, Madge; take me with all my sins."

She held out her hand to him as he stopped in his pacing to and fro, and they remained for some moments silent, with clasped hands, he looking down at her, his eyes kindling as he looked; she very pale and her lips slightly tremulous.

"You love me, Madge," he said breathlessly; "you can forget all for my sake."

"I am very sorry for you," she answered softly, "but I have done with individual love. I have given my heart and life to my sorrowing sisters."

"It is a craze, Madge; I say again it is a craze."

"You have not seen the good done—you have not seen the altered faces. There are women now in happy honest homes whom we have picked up out of the gutter. If you were to see one young wife I know of, with her husband and her baby, you would not believe there had ever been a stain on her life. He took her, knowing what her past had been, and he has cherished her as a pearl of price. These are rare cases; but they are bright spots which cheer us and help us through many difficulties."

"Well, you are resolute, I suppose. You will go on helping strangers, and you will abandon me to my fate."

"I do not abandon you. I will do anything in my power to befriend you, short of sacrificing duty for your sake. I think you are very unwise to loiter here when you ought to be getting far away from England, losing your identity in a strange world. Your wife's relations will not be satisfied for ever without certain knowledge of her fate. An investigation may be set on foot at any moment, and the truth may be brought to light. You should be out of the way before that can happen."

"I tell you I do not value my life unless you will share it. I would rather stay here and clean windows, than riot in luxury at the Antipodes."

Madge answered nothing. She felt the hopelessness of the situation. He had chosen to come there, and she had not denied him shelter. She had taken upon herself in some wise the

responsibility of his existence, since she had spoken of him to the Sisters; and now she felt that his presence there would be a constant source of anxiety and mental disturbance. She would have to be perpetually on her guard, for ever denying a love which was the strongest passion of her life. It had been in her despair at resigning him, that she had gone in quest of her erring mother. All that she had done for others had been the offshoot of her despairing love for him. And now he offered himself to her in his desolation, and she refused him.

"If I give way to his fancy he will forget all the past, and his repentance will become a mockery," she said to herself. "I cannot stand in the place of his dead wife. I must not be a gainer by his crime. How could I ever be at peace, remembering that it was murder that set him free to be my husband?"

CHAPTER XLIV.

"IS THERE NO BALM IN GILEAD?"

THE Coroner was a portly gentleman of sixty-five, who had fulfilled all the duties of a general practitioner in Chadford and the surrounding villages for upwards of thirty years, and who had retired on a comfortable fortune, made partly by his profession, and partly by fortunate investments in modest little branches and loops of the great railway system, which time and traffic had developed into important lines. He had bought for himself an estate of forty odd acres of excellent pasture land between the Chad and the shoulder of the moor, and he had built for himself one of those essentially Philistine houses, of the streaky-bacon order, which are the delight of men who make their fortunes in country towns. Altogether, Mr. Mapleson was a very worthy person; and when the office of Coroner became vacant his name appeared at the head of the poll.

Mr. Mapleson's study was a small square apartment, furnished with handsomely bound books of reference, a whip rack, and a formidable row of boots, which imparted an odour of Day and Martin to the atmosphere. Into this somewhat prosaic chamber, Melnotte, otherwise Markham, the detective, was ushered by the man-of-all-work on the morning of the discovery in the Abbey river; and in the briefest language he told what had happened, and his own conclusions therefrom.

"You think it is a case of murder," said Mr. Mapleson, biting the end of his pen.

"It can be nothing else. There is a carpet rolled round the body, and fastened with a silk handkerchief. Nothing has been touched since the remains were lifted out of the water; the colours in the carpet are distinguishable, and the string of silk round it is evidently a large neckerchief. There can be very little doubt that the body was thrown into the water after death."

"The remains are not in a condition to be identified, I conclude."

"No. Time and the river have done their work of destruction only too well. There are other means of identification; wedding-ring and keeper, for instance. The remains have not been touched more than was absolutely necessary in carrying them from the river to the dead-house, where they are waiting for the medical examination."

"And you are in a position to affirm that this is the body of Mrs. Belfield?"

"I am in a position to affirm as much, and I hope to be able to prove by circumstantial evidence that her husband murdered her, and threw her dead body into the river in the early morning of the 20th of August. But I will not trouble you with any further details. The inquest, which you are to hold to-morrow, will, I hope, be adjourned so as to give time for investigation. All I have done hitherto has been done in the dark. Many more details will doubtless come to light when the fact of the murder has been made public."

"Poor Lady Belfield!" sighed the Coroner. "Do you know that I had the honour of attending the family at the Abbey for thirty years. I remember the present Lady Belfield when her husband brought her home as a bride. She was a lovely woman then. She is a lovely woman now, lovely in mind as well as in person. This business will break her heart."

"I fear it will go hard with her."

"She adores her younger son. I have seen her agony when he has been laid up with some childish ailment. All her world was in that sick-bed. And to see him accused of murder! Mr. Markham, if you are deluded, if you have not ample justification for the course you are taking, you will be much to blame."

"My justification will be shown at the inquest. There must be an inquest."

"Yes, that is inevitable. I wish, with all my heart, Mr. Markham, you had never had that river dragged."

"Then you would have had an undetected murderer in your midst."

"Better that, perhaps, than that a good woman's heart should be broken."

It was a quality of Lady Belfield's character to evoke strong sympathy from all who were brought in familiar contact with her.

Melnotte had a fly waiting for him at the Coroner's door, and drove straight to the nearest Magistrate, from whom, after an interview of some length, he obtained a warrant for the arrest of Valentine Belfield on a suspicion of murder. With the County Magistrate, as with the Coroner, Melnotte found that sympathy with Lady Belfield was stronger than the abstract love of justice. He only just succeeded in getting the warrant signed in time for him to catch the next train for Exeter.

He was at Paddington at dusk, and went at once to the Great Western Hotel, where he inquired for Mr. Belfield.

Nothing had been seen of that gentleman except his luggage. That had been brought by a Great Western porter two evenings before with an intimation that Mr. Belfield was coming on to the hotel soon after; but nothing more had been heard of him. Three large portmanteaux, a gun-case, a roll of rugs and coats, and a hat-box, all marked V. B., were stacked in the hall, pending the arrival of the owner.

"Does Mr. Belfield usually stay here when he comes to town?" asked the detective.

"Yes, for a night or two at a time. He is one of our old customers," replied the manager.

Melnotte was at fault. That Valentine Belfield should have brought all that luggage to London, and then left England without it, seemed unlikely. No purpose could have been served by bringing the luggage unless for his use. To bring it to London and abandon it at an hotel could in no manner assist him in his flight, or tend to the mystification of his pursuers. The only explanation seemed that he had left his property at the hotel while he remained in a state of uncertainty as to his future course. He might be knocking about London, hesitating as to whither he should bend his steps.

That he was in hiding anywhere was unlikely, since he could as yet have no more cause for fear than at any time since the commission of his crime. Arguing with himself thus, Melnotte supposed that he would have very little difficulty in putting his hand upon the missing man. He went straight from the Great Western to Scotland Yard, secured an assistant official, engaged a hansom by the hour, and started upon his quest.

"London is a big place, Redway," he said, "but the big London is only an aggregate of little Londons. Each man has his own peculiar metropolis, which is generally no bigger than a moderate-sized country town. Now I take it that Mr. Bel-

field's London is bounded on the West by Tattersall's, and on the East by the Criterion, on the South by Pall Mall, and by Oxford Street on the North. If we don't find him within those limits we must look for him at Liverpool, Southampton, or Plymouth."

This was on the way to the Badminton, where Melnotte alighted and interviewed the porter. Mr. Belfield had not been seen there for six months.

"Not since Lord St. Austell's 'oss Postcard lost the Great Ebor," said the porter, who dated most events by the Racing Calendar.

From the Badminton, Melnotte drove to the Argus.

Here again Mr. Belfield had not been seen for months.

Melnotte drove westward, and contrived to see one of the men at Tattersall's, though the yard was shut.

No tidings of Mr. Belfield.

"That'll do for to-night, Redway," said Melnotte, considerably disconcerted. "I'll drive you back to the Yard, and then I'll go and dine and turn in for the night. If Mr. Belfield had been knocking about town in an open, easy-going manner, I believe I should have heard of him at one of those places. So I am disposed to think he has taken the alarm and is trying to get out of the country. I hardly think he can have got clear off yet; but I shall set the wires at work again before I eat my chop."

Mr. Melnotte set the wires at work to a considerable extent just before the closing of the chief telegraph office. He telegraphed to all the ports from which a man seeking to escape from justice was likely to attempt a start, and took measures to secure attention for the fugitive.

He was up and about betimes next morning, saw Mr. Belfield's tailor, took a stroll and an early cigar in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park Corner, hung about Tattersall's for an hour, looked in at a famous spurrier's in Piccadilly and a fashionable maker of hunting boots in Bond Street, and before eleven o'clock had satisfied himself that Mr. Belfield had not been seen at the West End of London since the previous summer.

The question to be solved was what had become of Mr. Belfield after he arrived at Paddington?

In such a town as Chadford the finding of a body in the Abbey river, and the notice of an impending inquest at the Ring of Bells Tavern in Little George Street, were not likely to remain unknown to the inhabitants. Before Melnotte had gone far upon his journey to London everybody in Chadford knew that a body was lying in the dead-house, and that an inquest was to be held upon the following afternoon.

Melnotte had imposed silence upon the men who dragged the river, and yet it was known somehow that there were appearances about the body that pointed to foul play rather than accidental drowning, while there were those who declared that the murdered corpse was that of the missing Mrs. Belfield.

Mr. Rockstone was one of the first to hear of the event which everybody in Chadford was talking about. He came out of the house of a sick parishioner, where all was quiet and shadow, into the bright winter sunlight, to find a group of townspeople standing in front of the saddler's shop in earnest conversation. From them he heard what had been found in the Abbey river.

His heart turned to lead as he listened. His mind had not been free from anxiety about Valentine's wife. He had carefully avoided questioning Lady Belfield or her sons, but he had wondered at the prevailing ignorance about the runaway wife's fate. When a woman elopes with a lover, there are generally those who know where she has gone, and who report and criticize her movements; but in this case no one had heard of the fugitive, no one knew where she was hiding her dishonoured existence. And now this finding of the corpse in the river pointed at fearful issues—at the best, suicide; at the worst, murder. He thought of Lady Belfield's agony when the talk of the town should reach her; and it must reach her very soon. In twenty-four hours every fact connected with the disfigured remains yonder must be brought to light, published to the world, discussed and commented upon in a tavern parlour. Friendship and love would be powerless to keep that horror from her, powerless even to blunt the edge of that anguish.

There was a fly crawling along the High Street on its return from the station. The Vicar jumped into it, and told the man to drive to the Abbey at his sharpest pace. He wanted to find Sir Adrian before anything was known there. Andrew ushered him into the library, where Adrian was sitting at his desk, surrounded with books and papers. He looked ill and careworn, the Vicar thought, but had too calm an air to have heard the evil news.

"My dear Rockstone, this is good of you," exclaimed Adrian, starting up and wheeling an armchair towards the hearth for his friend, and then seating himself opposite him. "It is an age since you have dropped in upon me so early. Tell me all your parish news, and your parish wants, if you have any."

"I cannot talk about the parish to-day. I have come to tell you of something terrible which has come to pass, and which may concern you and yours very nearly."

Adrian's face blanched to a ghastly pallor, and the hand grasping the arm of his chair trembled perceptibly.

"My God!" he gasped; "what is it?"

"A body has been found in the Abbey river an hour ago."

"How found—who found it?"

"The river was dragged this morning, I believe, at the instigation of Colonel Deverill's friend, Mr. Melnotte, who dropped his watch out of a boat a day or two ago, and wanted to have it found. A body has been found in the deep pool, near the chestnut copse, and there is to be an inquest to-morrow."

It was some moments before Adrian spoke, and then he asked quietly:

"Has the body been identified?"

"No, it is past all recognition, except by circumstantial evidence; but there is a rumour in Chadford, how arising I know not, that it is the body of your sister-in-law."

Again Adrian was silent. He would have given worlds to be able to speak freely, to confess all the hideous truth to this one staunch friend, but loyalty to his brother restrained him.

"My sister-in-law's fate is wrapped in darkness," he said, after a long pause; "I do not understand why any one should connect her with this drowned corpse."

"The reasons for such a suspicion will come to light at the inquest, I suppose. It is of your mother I have been thinking, Adrian, since I heard of this discovery. How will it affect her?"

"How can it affect her? I cannot see——" Adrian began helplessly.

"If it be found that there has been foul play."

"Why foul play? Should this body be identified as that of Mrs. Belfield, the inference will be that she drowned herself."

"The people in Chadford are talking of something more terrible than that. There is a rumour that circumstances point to murder. Adrian, I must speak plainly," said the Vicar, with undisguised grief. "Suspicion points to your brother as the murderer. It is of your mother I think. What can you or I do to help her to bear the blow?"

"Nothing, I fear. She adores Valentine. If any evil befall him it will kill her."

"You will do all you can to keep idle rumours from her, and yet to prepare her for anything that may happen to-morrow. Where is your brother?"

"In London, I believe."

"You do not even know his whereabouts?"

"No. He left here with the idea of going abroad—perhaps to Africa or South America. It was not his own fancy. My mother and I were anxious about his health and spirits, and urged him to travel. He has not written to me since he left."

"That is unlucky. He ought to be here to face any difficulty that may arise to-morrow."

Adrian was silent. To him, who knew all, the one hope was that his brother might have left the country for ever.

"Well, my dear Adrian," said the Vicar quietly, "we must wait and see what to-morrow will bring forth. I think you know that you may count upon me to do anything that lies within the compass of my will or my strength. Would to God I could see my way to being useful to you and your dear mother. I shrink from asking you questions, because I feel I am on delicate ground; but if—if you know anything that could assure me of the falsehood of these rumours—if, for instance, you had heard of your sister-in-law since her supposed elopement——"

"I have heard nothing of her. It is better that I should answer no questions till to-morrow. I suppose I shall be called at the inquest?"

"I conclude so, if there is sufficient ground for identifying the body with your sister-in-law."

"Then I will keep my own counsel till I am before the Coroner."

Mr. Rockstone left Sir Adrian soon after this, somewhat mystified by his calmness.

CHAPTER XLV.

ON THE RACK

The inquest had been called for two o'clock in the afternoon, which hour gave the detective time to get back from London shortly after the opening of the inquiry.

The Coroner held his court in an upstairs room of the Ring of Bells. It was a wainscoted apartment, which at ordinary times was divided into two rooms, but which in its double length was used for vestry dinners, auctions, and public meetings of all kinds.

Colonel Deverill and Lord St. Austell sat near the Coroner, with their faces shadowed, and their figures partly hidden from the crowd at the lower end of the room by an old-fashioned four-fold screen. To the right of the Coroner sat a middle-aged, sandy-whiskered gentleman, with a bald head, and a legal air, who took careful notes of the proceedings. It was known to some of the audience that this gentleman was a solicitor from the Treasury, and that he was present in the capacity of Public Prosecutor; but it was not known to anybody that his arrival

on the scene was brought about by Lord St. Austell's urgent application to the authorities at the Home Office.

Lady Belfield and Sir Adrian sat together on the other side of the room, and Lady Belfield's old and trusted lawyer, Mr. Gresham, of the old-established firm of Gresham, Gresham and Thorogood, Lincoln's Inn, sat a little way in front of his client. Adrian had entreated his mother not to be present at this inquiry; but she had insisted, and he could but submit to her will. She was pale as marble, and her plain black gown and bonnet made her pallor more conspicuous. Her old friend the Vicar sat just behind her, and bent forward now and then to speak to her. On the table in front of the Coroner and Jury lay the stained and ragged remains of a Persian prayer-rug, a silk muffler, and four rings.

Felix Loseby, a medical practitioner of Chadford, was the first witness.

He deposed to having examined the body, which he pronounced to be that of a young woman with long brown hair. He had discovered an injury upon the left temple, where the bone was fractured as if by a heavy blow from some blunt instrument. Such a blow, he said, in answer to the Coroner's question, would be sufficient to cause death. There was no other mark of violence.

The Coroner asked if death could have been caused by drowning.

No. The state of the lungs indicated that the deceased had died before she was thrown into the water.

The rings on the table had been found on the fingers of the left hand, which was so confined by the carpet and the long hair, that it was impossible for the rings to have been washed off by the action of the water.

He was of opinion that the body had been in the river for some months; probably, in reply to a juryman, six months.

Mr. Loseby further described how the rug had been tied round the body by the long silk muffler now lying on the table.

The two men who had dragged the river deposed to having found the body in a deep pool, which formed a little inlet, under a group of willows.

Colonel Deverill was next examined. He had seen the remains, and believed them to be those of his daughter, on account of the colour and texture of the hair. His daughter had been remarkable for the beauty and profusion of her hair, which was of a peculiar shade of brown, with a natural ripple in it. He could swear to the cat's-eye and diamond ring upon the table as his daughter's engagement ring, given to her by Mr. Belfield. He could swear to the ring with a brilliant cross set in black enamel.

It was a mourning ring, and his own gift to his younger daughter. It contained her mother's hair.

The Colonel was deeply affected while giving his evidence, and Lady Belfield seemed equally overcome. There was a dead silence at the end of the room where the crowd was congregated —a silence of mournful sympathy.

Mr. Belfield was next called; whereupon Mr. Gresham rose and informed the Coroner that Mr. Belfield had gone to London three days before. A message had been telegraphed to him at the Great Western Hotel, where he usually put up, and to the two clubs which he was in the habit of using, but no reply had yet been received.

It was at this juncture that Melnotte quietly entered the room, and made his way to a seat at the back of the Coroner.

Sir Adrian Belfield was next called.

He was asked to state the circumstances of Mrs. Belfield's disappearance from the Abbey.

"I can only tell you that we rose one morning—on the morning of August the 20th—to find her gone."

"Did she leave no trace of the manner by which she had gone?"

"No. She left a letter stating her intention to leave her husband, which letter was found by a servant after my sister-in-law's disappearance."

"Can you produce that letter?"

"I cannot. It is in my brother's possession."

"You and Lady Belfield were both at the Abbey at the time of Mrs. Belfield's disappearance, I understand?"

"We were."

"Do you know nothing as to the hour at which she went, or her mode of leaving the house?"

"Nothing."

He answered unfalteringly. He knew that in so answering he was guilty of perjury; but he knew also that the only chance of saving his brother was to lie unblushingly. He who loved truth and honour better than his own life was willing so to perjure himself for the love of his brother, and of the heart-broken mother yonder, whose sad eyes were watching him.

"Was Mr. Belfield at the Abbey on that night?"

"He was not."

"You are sure of that fact? You had better reflect seriously, Sir Adrian, before you answer my question."

He suspected an attempt to trap him into a fatal admission, and answered deliberately:

"I am sure."

"That will do, Sir Adrian. You can sit down."

Melnotte whispered something to the Coroner, and the next

witness was called. John Grange, coachman at the Station Hotel, Chadford Road.

"Do you remember anything particular happening upon the 19th of August last year?"

"Yes, sir. I remember being called up to take out a fly after eleven o'clock. There's a train comes into Chadford Road Station at 11.43, but we don't often get a fare by that train, as it's a slow 'un. I was to get my landau ready and look sharp about it, for Mr. Belfield."

"Where did you drive Mr. Belfield?"

"I took him as far as the avenoo leading to the Abbey. In the middle of the avenoo he puts out his 'ed and calls me to stop, and gets out of the trap a'most before I could stop. He gives me a shilling, and tells me to go home, and then he starts off a'most at a run terwards the Abbey."

"Are you quite sure as to the date?"

"Can't be no mistake about that. The fly was booked that night. There it is in the master's day-book: 'August 19th. Fly to Belfield Abbey.'"

"You are sure the gentleman you drove was Mr. Belfield?"

"Quite sure."

"Would you know Mr. Belfield from his brother, Sir Adrian?" asked Mr. Gresham, the Coroner having no further questions to ask this witness.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Belfield's a bigger-made man. I've known the two gentlemen by sight since they was boys, and I could swear to either of them anywheres."

So much for John Grange, of the Station Hotel.

Lady Belfield was the next witness called.

She was asked to state any facts she could recall connected with Mrs. Belfield's disappearance.

"There is very little for me to remember," she said. "My first knowledge of my daughter-in-law's disappearance was from my housekeeper, at nine o'clock in the morning. A housemaid had found Mrs. Belfield's room empty."

"A housemaid found her room empty in the morning of August 20th. Had the bed been slept in?"

"It had not."

"Then the inference would be that she left the house at night?"

"I do not know that. She may have remained up all night, and may have left early in the morning before the servants were up."

"She left a letter, I understand?"

"Yes, the housemaid found a letter."

"Addressed to your son?"

"It was written to my son."

"Was it a sealed letter?"

"No, it was opened and unfinished."

"An unfinished letter, left open; lying on a table, I presume?"

"I did not ask where the letter was found."

"Did you see your daughter-in-law's room that morning?"

"No, I went to London by the morning train. A telegram was delivered just after I heard of my daughter-in-law's disappearance—a telegram purporting to come from my younger son in London, and which caused me considerable alarm. I started for the station as soon as my carriage could be got ready."

"Was the telegram actually from your son?"

"It was not. I have reason to believe that it was part of a plot to decoy my daughter from her home."

"Did you find your son in London?"

"I did not."

"Had you any reason to suppose that he was in London?"

"Either there or at York. I had heard of him last at York."

"You did not know that he came to the Abbey on the night of the 19th?"

"I cannot believe that he was there."

"Yet you have heard the evidence of the man who drove him into your park?"

"I have heard that."

"What time did you and your family retire to rest on the 19th of August?"

"Mrs. Belfield left the drawing-room soon after nine o'clock. She complained of a headache. I went to my bedroom at half-past ten, and Sir Adrian went to the library at the same time."

"Did you hear anything unusual during the night?"

"Nothing."

"How far is your bedroom from that occupied by Mrs. Belfield?"

"It is at the other end of the house."

"You say Sir Adrian retired to the library at half-past ten upon that particular evening. Do you know at what hour he went to his bedroom?"

"It must have been very late. He is in the habit of reading late at night; and on this night he told me that he read later than usual, and fell asleep in his chair in the library."

"Do you mean that he did not go to bed at all?"

"He did not tell me that, only that he had fallen asleep in his chair."

The next witness was Jane Pook, the housemaid.

On being asked if she remembered anything particular upon the morning of August the 20th, she described her entrance into Mrs. Belfield's bedroom with the early cup of tea which that lady was in the habit of taking while her bath was being pre-

pared for her; and how she had found the room empty, and the bed undisturbed; and how on looking about the room she had discovered an open letter lying on the floor.

"Did you read that letter?"

"Yes, I was so taken aback that I read the letter almost before I knew what I was doing. If I'd had time to give it a thought, I should have been above doing such a thing."

"Did anything peculiar strike you in the letter?"

"It was a dreadful letter, telling her husband that she did not love him, and that she loved somebody else, and was going off with him. The letter wasn't finished. It left off in the middle of a sentence."

"As if she had been interrupted while writing it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you observe anything else unusual on that particular morning?" inquired the sandy-whiskered gentleman, upon the Coroner's interrogatory being finished.

"No, sir—nothing else, leastways——"

Jane Pook faltered, reddened, and looked nervously towards Sir Adrian.

"There *was* something else," said the sandy-whiskered gentleman. "What was it?"

"Sir Adrian's bed had not been slept in."

"Where had Sir Adrian spent the night?"

"He must have been all night in the library. The oil was burnt out in the two lamps, and the candles on his desk were burnt lower than usual. Sir Adrian often sits up late at night, studying."

"But does he often refrain from going to bed at all?" inquired the sandy-whiskered gentleman.

"No, sir."

"Did you ever know such a thing to occur before?"

"I can't call to mind, sir."

"You mean that it never did occur before?"

"I think not, sir."

"Have you lived long at Belfield Abbey?"

"Five years."

Mrs. Marrable, the housekeeper, was next called. She was very pale, and her eyelids were swollen with weeping. She gave a vindictive look at Mr. Melnotte, as she took the sacred volume in her hand, which argued ill for the Christian temper of her mind at that moment.

"Do you recognize anything upon that table?" asked the Coroner.

"No, sir,"

"Look again, if you please. There is something there which you have seen before. Perhaps you had better put on your

spectacles, and look at the object a little closer. Do you see now what it is?"

"It looks rather like an old rug."

"It *is* a rug. I think you have seen that rug before."

"I can't call it to mind."

"I fear you must have a bad memory, Mrs. Marrable. Did you ever miss a carpet or rug of any kind out of one of the Abbey bedrooms?"

Again Mrs. Marrable looked at Melnotte, the detective, and by the nervous action of her fingers it might be inferred that she longed to inflict some slight injury upon his imperturbable countenance.

"I may have been foolish enough to talk some of my nonsense to spies and eavesdroppers," she said acrimoniously, "but as to missing a rug or a carpet out of a house where there's nothing but honest servants——"

"Mrs. Marrable, was there or was there not a Persian rug missing out of Mrs. Belfield's bedroom on the 20th of August?" asked the sandy-whiskered gentleman severely. "Remember, if you please, that you are on your oath."

Mrs. Marrable hesitated, looked piteously at her mistress, whose face was rigid with agony, and replied:

"I did miss a Persian rug."

"Can you tell me the pattern of that rug?"

"It was something of a pine pattern."

"If you will be good enough to look closer at the rug on the table, I think you will see that it is a pine pattern."

"It is too much discoloured for me to make out anything about it."

"You are underrating your own intelligence. Pray look at the rug again. Now, will you swear that is not the rug you last saw in Mrs. Belfield's bedroom?"

"No."

"Then perhaps you will admit that it is the same rug? Remember that to deny a fact of which you are convinced is perjury."

"I believe it is the rug."

"That will do."

The winter day had closed in some time before the inquiry had arrived at this stage; and the Coroner now suggested the adjournment of the inquest, to give time for the development of fresh evidence.

"The case is exceptionally painful, gentlemen," he said, "and I should be sorry if anything were done in a hurried manner. I believe that upon every consideration it will be best that this inquiry should be adjourned until next Friday, when we will meet again in this room at the same hour as we met to-day. The in-

terment of the remains of that unhappy lady whose fate we are here to investigate can be proceeded with in the meantime."

It was some time before the room was cleared of coroner, jury, reporters, and audience, but Lady Belfield and her son did not wait for the crowd to disperse. They retired together by a door near the end of the room where they had been sitting, and thus escaped the crowd.

Sir Adrian put his mother's hand through his arm and supported her faltering footsteps as he led her downstairs and out into the dusky street, where her carriage was waiting for her. She spoke no word until after the carriage had moved away, and then at last the white lips moved, and she asked in tones that were like a wail of agony:

"Is this true, Adrian?"

"What, mother?"

"Is it true that he came to the Abbey that night?"

"Yes, it is true."

"Oh, God! And you swore that he was not there."

"I perjured myself—to save him. I knew nothing about the fly. I did not know that any one had seen him."

"You tried to save him—that means that he is guilty—that—he killed her," sobbed Lady Belfield, in broken snatches of speech.

Adrian was silent for some moments, thinking deeply, deliberating within himself if it might be possible to keep the fatal truth from his mother. But it seemed to him that it would not be possible, that the meshes of the net were fast closing round him and his brother, that all which had been done that night in the darkness must inevitably be brought to light. The only hope left was that Valentine might escape pursuit.

"Mother, I have striven to keep this horror from you: I have sworn falsely this day in the hope that my brother's guilt might remain for ever hidden: but I feel that all is over, that the evidence you have heard must bring his guilt home to your mind as well as to the minds of strangers. Thank God he is not so guilty as he may appear; he was not a deliberate murderer."

And then he told his mother briefly, plainly, unflinchingly, how the deed had been done; how one moment of passion had made Valentine Belfield a criminal; how he had obstinately insisted upon hiding his crime, and had thus brought upon himself the ignominy of this day's inquiry.

"How are we to save him, Adrian?" asked Lady Belfield. "We must save him. O God, to think of my son arraigned for murder, standing in the dock to answer with his life! They would hang him, Adrian—they would hang my beloved one. Oh, Adrian, you can help me to save him, to get him away to some safe hiding-place before the police can hunt him down.

There are corners of the earth where he would be safe. I would go with him, live with him anywhere—in the dreariest spot of earth, among a savage people—happy and full of gratitude to God, only to know that my dearest had been saved from a shameful death."

"We will do all that ingenuity can do, dear mother," Adrian answered quietly, while his mother sat back in a corner of the carriage, her face hidden, her whole frame convulsed with grief. "In all probability Valentine has left England before now. The fact that he has not written to me may mean that he is on the sea; that he snatched the earliest opportunity of getting away."

The carriage was in the avenue by this time. As the coachman drew up his horses in front of the Abbey, a gig drove rapidly round the gravel sweep, and pulled up a little way from the porch.

Two men alighted from the gig. One of them was Melnotte, the detective; and in the other Sir Adrian recognized a local police-officer.

He took no notice of the two men until he had assisted his mother into the house, and placed her in the care of her maid, who was waiting in the hall to receive her. Then he went back to the porch, and confronted the detective.

"I am sorry to appear upon an unpleasant errand, Sir Adrian," said Melnotte. "I have a warrant for your arrest as accessory to the murder of Mrs. Helen Belfield. It is too serious a charge to admit of bail, so I must request you to accompany me to Chadford without loss of time."

"You mean to Chadford Gaol, I suppose."

"Yes. You will be treated there with all respect, and accommodated with a private room. I must warn you that anything you may say——"

"You may save yourself the trouble. I am not going to say anything, except that I consider that Colonel Deverill has been guilty of ungentlemanlike conduct in bringing a detective into my house as my guest."

"Colonel Deverill's position as a father may excuse some laxity in a point of etiquette."

"It was more than a point of etiquette; it was a point of honour, Mr. Melnotte—if your name is Melnotte."

"My name is Markham. I was a gentleman once upon a time, Sir Adrian. Necessity compels men to adopt strange trades. Will you be driven to the gaol in your carriage, sir, or will you allow me to drive you in my gig? Thompson can walk back."

"I may as well go in your gig. It is too dark for any one to recognize me; and, for the matter of that, everybody in Chadford

will know where I am before to-morrow morning. Be good enough to wait while I give an order to my servant."

The detective waited, taking care not to let Sir Adrian out of his sight during the brief delay.

Adrian ordered a valise to be packed with the necessary changes for an absence of three or four days, and then sat down at a table in the hall to write to his mother, while Melnotte stood in front of the fire, warming his back and admiring the stately old panelled hall and vaulted roof.

It was a difficult letter to write, and Adrian could think of only one form of consolation. "My arrest may make my brother's escape easier," he wrote. "They cannot find any direct evidence against me, and, on reflection, I believe it will be impossible to bring any conclusive proof against Valentine. Put your trust in Providence, dear mother, and hope for the passing of the dark hour. My heart is less heavy than it was under the burden of an intolerable secret."

An hour later his mother was sitting by his side in the gloomy-looking parlour which he was privileged to occupy in Chadford Gaol.

"My poor Adrian, it is so hard that you should suffer—you, who are innocent—who would have saved your brother's good name had he only been guided by you. It is very hard."

"I can bear it, mother. Would to God it had been possible for me to pay the penalty of my brother's crime. I would have done as much willingly—for your sake."

CHAPTER XLVI.

"I WILL STAND BY MY BROTHER"

It was the morning after the inquest, and Valentine had begun his new occupation as man-of-all-work so soon as there was light enough in the dull grey sky to allow him to set about his labours. The Sisters were astir at dawn, working diligently, lighting the fires, sweeping the stairs, and cleaning the lower rooms. Valentine relieved them of those rougher tasks which they had performed hitherto. He washed out the back yard, washed and hearthstoned steps and window-sills, and cleaned all the lower windows. Inexperience made him clumsy; but energy and strength of will carried him through the work much better than could have been expected.

"I had no idea window-cleaning was such interesting work," he said to Madge, as she gave him his breakfast of tea and bread in the parlour, where she and the two Sisters had breakfasted previously. Their morning fare was only dry bread. Butter was a luxury reserved for the evening. There was a wholesome meal of meat and vegetables at two o'clock. Tea was taken between five and six, after the inmates had been served; and there was a supper of bread and cheese at ten o'clock. The Sisters who sat up with the sick were allowed tea and bread and butter in the course of the night, but neither wine nor beer was drunk by any of the sisterhood, and stimulants were only given to patients when ordered by the doctor.

Valentine took his tea and bread with as contented a spirit as if he had been in the centre of Africa, and no better fare had been possible.

"I'm afraid you will soon grow tired of window-cleaning and of dry bread," said Madge, contemplating him with her grave slow smile, full of thought.

"You do not know me. If I am strong for evil, I may also be strong for good. I mean to serve you—as Caliban served Prospero, yet not like Caliban. He served for fear; I am your slave for love. I shall be ready to clean the outsides of the upper windows as soon as I can begin without disturbing the patients. I am promised the loan of a ladder from your milkman round the corner."

"That milkman is a treasure. He keeps one particular cow for our consumptive patients, and though I believe he adulterates all the rest of his milk, our supply is always pure; and he charges us a halfpenny a quart less than other people pay. You cannot think how good people are to us."

"I'll go out and look after my ladder," said Valentine; and he walked off in a business-like manner, wearing his fustian and corduroy as if he had never worn anything else.

A few paces from the house he met a boy with newspapers, bought a *Daily Telegraph*, and put it into his pocket.

"For my dinner-hour's amusement," he said to himself. "I believe the working man always reserves the news for his dinner-hour."

His step, which had been so heavy and sluggish of late, in the monotonous leisure of his country home, was light to-day, as he went for the ladder. He came back carrying it on his shoulder. His experiences as a sportsman had braced his muscles, and he carried the ladder as easily as if it had been a gun or an oar. He felt nearer happiness than he had felt since that fatal night. In the first place, it was an infinite relief to be away from the scene of his crime; and in the second place, there was a world of comfort in being associated with the one woman whose influence

could at once soothe and strengthen—the one woman who knew his ghastly secret, yet had not turned from him with loathing.

He could never forget that kiss upon his forehead which had assured him of a woman's pitying love. He had taken no base advantage of that sign of tenderness; he had not pressed his suit with the vehemence of a passion that will take no denial. He had been humble with her, as became him in the abasement of his guilt. And he was happier now, toiling for her, than he could have hoped to be. He laboured at his task all the morning, one of the Sisters working with him on the inner side of the windows; and the general result was an increase of brightness which seemed like the forerunner of spring. He saw something of the inmates of the Forlorn Hope in the course of his morning's work. In the front room of the first-floor—once a drawing-room, with French windows and an iron balcony—he saw several women of various ages, from eighteen to forty, some engaged in plain sewing, others in fancy needlework, and one at an ironing-board. These were the convalescents and those who had been received because of their destitution rather than on account of ill-health. In other rooms he saw the sick in white-curtained beds. Everywhere there were signs of careful management, cleanliness, inventive power, the ability to do much with little means. This humble institution, maintained by a few women, was more interesting than the grandest building which public charity ever raised.

By half-past one the windows were all cleaned, and Valentine went to the little room which had been allotted to him, the room where he had spent a sleepless night on a hard and narrow pallet, which the Iron Duke might have approved. Here he washed off the traces of his toil, brushed his fustian jacket, and prepared himself for dinner, hoping to eat that meal *tête-à-tête* with Madge. He had heard her say that the three Sisters dined in the upper room with the women, and that she waited upon them. She must take her own dinner somewhere, he argued. Why not with him?

His hopes were strengthened on going into the parlour, where he saw the table laid for two. Madge was upstairs, where the dinner was going forward. It was she who carved and distributed the food, while the other three Sisters ate with their charges, and maintained a cheerful tone of a family meal. There was nothing penitential in the atmosphere of everyday life at the Forlorn Hope: yet sorrow for sin was deeply felt there, and many a penitent's tears had been poured into the Sisters' laps, and many a heart-broken sob had mixed with the prayers of the community.

Valentine seated himself by the window, and unfolded his *Telegraph*.

He began with a sweeping survey of the pages, to see what was best worth reading.

"A Devonshire Tragedy.

"Considerable excitement has been created at the town of Chadford, North Devon, by the finding of a body in the Abbey river near that town, under circumstances which appear to indicate foul play. The body has been identified as that of the wife of Mr. Belfield, of Belfield Abbey, Chadford, whose disappearance from her home was one of the social scandals of last autumn."

Here followed a full report of the Coroner's inquest, and an account of the arrest of Sir Adrian Belfield on suspicion of being concerned in the murder of his sister-in-law.

"The startling character of the revelations, the social position of the parties involved, and the respect which is felt for them in the neighbourhood combine to render this one of the most extraordinary cases that have come before the public for many years, and the result of the adjourned inquest will be awaited with keen anxiety."

Slowly and deliberately Valentine Belfield read and pondered over the report of the inquest. To him who was in the secret the circumstances of his guilt seemed to start out into the broad light of day from the evidence of those different witnesses. The unfinished letter, broken off in the midst of a sentence—the missing rug found tied about the victim's body—his own secret visit to his mother's house—his brother's vigil: all pointed at the fact of murder.

Yet how, in the face of such evidence against him, had they dared to arrest his brother? Under suspicion of being concerned in the murder? Yes, he had been with the murderer in that dreadful hour after the deed was done. They two had been together, and the law might call Adrian an accessory after the fact.

He was still poring over the report, when Madge came in, carrying a tray with the fragments of the upstairs meal.

"Come, brother John," she said cheerily, as she set a dish on the table. "My people were in very good appetite, but there is plenty left for you and me. I am sure you must be ready for dinner."

"Not quite," he answered gravely, "and I'm afraid I shall spoil your dinner if I tell you what has taken away my appetite."

She went over to him and laid her hand upon his shoulder, looking down at the newspaper. Her quick eye caught the familiar names, and she read the report of the inquest across his shoulder.

"You see I was right," she said; "there was not an hour to

be lost, and you have wasted days. You will go at once now—at once—or as soon as it is dark. It may be safer not to leave this house till dusk. Your working-man's suit will serve a good purpose now. I will go out and get you an outfit, and pack everything ready for you. Then you must start for Liverpool by the train that leaves Euston at seven this evening, and you can get off to-morrow morning by any ship that may be leaving. There must be steamers leaving every day. Take the first that will carry you far away from England. You will go, won't you?"

He was holding her arm in his strong grasp, looking at her fixedly, yet hardly seeming to listen to her eager words.

"You will go?" she urged.

"Not without you. I have said it before, Madge, and I say it again. I have no desire to prolong my life unless I can spend it with you."

"You have seen what my work is here, and you ask me to give it up in order to——"

"To share a murderer's exile; to play hide and seek with the law; to drive away the horrors of remorse; to cure bad dreams; and to save a sinner from madness. That is what I ask you to do, Madge. Any one can carry on your work here. No one but you can save me."

"What if I were to say yes?" asked Madge, after a few moments of deepest thought, returning that fixed look of his with a gaze that was still more earnest, for it seemed to peer into his very soul.

"You lift me from hell to heaven at the mere thought. Oh, Madge, be generous, reward an ungenerous lover. I lost you once by the meanness of my love. I love you now as you deserve to be loved. Forget all I have ever been; remember only what I am—your adoring slave. Let us be married before the Registrar to-morrow morning. We can start for Liverpool afterwards."

"And when we are gone, Valentine, when you have got clear away, what is to become of your brother? Have you thought of that?"

No, he had not thought of that; but he answered, almost carelessly:

"He will be safe—there can be no evidence against him."

"The evidence against him is almost as strong as against you. There is no one but you who can prove his innocence."

"And you would have me give myself up in order to clear him?"

"If there is no other way of clearing him—yes."

"You hold my life very lightly."

"I hold life as less than honour. You have brought your

brother into peril. It would be a cowardly act to desert him now."

"Yet a few minutes ago you urged me to leave the country."

"I forgot all but your own safety."

"I have told you that I do not set a high price upon that. Well, you are right, Madge. You are always right. I will stand by my brother. I will go back to Chadford to-morrow, even if Chadford be a short cut to the gallows."

"It will not prove that," she answered, her pale face kindling with the light of enthusiasm. "Confess the truth as you confessed to me. Let all the world know how you sinned in one fatal moment of passion, and how you tried to hide your sin. There are few who will not pity you, as I pity you."

She bent over him as he sat leaning forward, with his eyes brooding upon the ground. She laid her hand upon his head, and, thrilled by that gentle touch, he looked up, and their eyes met.

"Say that you love me, Madge, and I will do anything."

"Yes, I love you—yes, I always loved you. It was love for you that drove me out into the world in my despair, to find something to fill my empty heart, aching for love of you. It was love of you that sought relief in soothing sinners. I have always loved you. Do this one brave thing, and I can respect and honour you."

"Will you marry me, Madge, if Jack Ketch does not get me?"

"Yes."

"That is a promise worth waiting for. Will you wait for me, Madge, if they keep me in Dartmoor prison till my hair is white?"

"I will wait till the end of my days. Come what may, there shall be no other love in my life."

"Pledge yourself to that with a kiss, Madge."

He clasped his arms round her as she bent over him, and their lips met, half in sorrow, half in joy; joy on his side that she was won, would own love's subjection, she who had seemed to him too strong for love; sorrow on her side that he must stand as a criminal before his fellow-men, and risk his life for honour's sake.

"When shall I start for Chadford, Madge?" he asked.

"The sooner the better. The police may be on the watch for you. I should like you to be able to return there as a free agent."

"You are right. It would be hateful to go back under convoy. There is an afternoon train, a beast of a train that stops at nearly every station, the train by which I travelled that night," with a shudder. "I will go by that."

"I will go with you."

"Madge," he cried, overjoyed.

"I may as well keep you company on the journey, while we are still free to be together. Will you go in those clothes?"

"No. They would look like a disguise. I left a suit at the slop-seller's. If any one would fetch it?"

"I will go for it," she answered, "and I will arrange for leaving this house for a few days."

CHAPTER XLVII.

THICKER THAN WATER

The police had not been idle during the day of the inquest, or during that day on which Valentine Belfield was making his first experiment in the art of window-cleaning. The usual machinery had been at work, and with the usual result of failure during the first forty-eight hours of pursuit. The first few days in such a hunt are generally blank.

Melnotte had not gone back to London after the inquest. He relied on subordinate intelligence, assisted by photography, to track the suspected criminal. His own work he felt lay in the neighbourhood of Chadford, where the final links in the chain of evidence were to be put together. Lord St. Austell was still at the Lamb Hotel, keeping very quiet, but ready at all seasons to confer with the detective.

Sir Adrian spent the first day of his imprisonment in a listless indifference as regarded himself or his own convenience, but in keenest anxiety about his brother. He had Mr. Gresham, the solicitor, with him upon the evening of his arrest, and they discussed the evidence given at the inquest.

"You have to deal with the evidence as it stands, Gresham," he said. "I admit nothing about myself or my brother."

"I am sorry to say, Sir Adrian, that unless you can disprove John Grange's statement, you tacitly confess yourself guilty of perjury."

"I am not in a position at present to disprove Grange's statement; but I think I have as good a right to be believed as he has."

"On any indifferent matter your word would doubtless be taken in preference to his; but on a question of life and death

for your brother, the statement of any disinterested witness would be preferred to yours."

"What am I to do in my brother's interest? I do not care about myself."

"In both your interests we must try to secure Distin. I will telegraph to him directly the office is open to-morrow morning."

Mr. Distin's fame as a criminal lawyer was not unknown to Sir Adrian Belfield, and it seemed to him well that in this struggle with Fate he should have the best assistance that training and hereditary instinct could afford. Distin had been suckled upon criminal law, and cradled in the Old Bailey. No doubt Distin was the man.

It was a shock to Sir Adrian, therefore, when Mr. Gresham came into his room next morning—soon after the coffee and hot rolls which an obsequious official had brought over from the Ring of Bells—carrying Mr. Distin's telegram: "Sorry I cannot accept your retainer. Am already engaged by Colonel Deverill."

"This is unlucky for us, Sir Adrian. It is bad enough not to have Distin with us, but it is worse to have him against us."

"You can get some one else I suppose if you are not strong enough yourself to protect our interests."

"I am not a criminal lawyer, Sir Adrian; but perhaps my regard for your family may stand in the place of experience at the Old Bailey. I am not afraid to undertake your defence, if you will trust me."

"I would rather trust you than any other member of your profession."

The following day was Sunday—a dismal Sabbath for Adrian, who had so rarely been absent from his place in the old parish church, and whose Sundays had been verily days of rest—days devoted to kindly visitings among the old and infirm, to serious reading and quiet thought. A gloom had overshadowed all his days since his brother's crime, but Sunday had been not the less a day apart—a time of prayer and meditation, remorseful memory of the hapless dead, and intercession for the sinner.

This day he spent with his mother sitting beside him, in mournful silence, or in silent prayer for the most part. They sat together through the dull wintry day, taking very little heed of time—only noting the passing of the hours by the church bells, sounding with a heavy monotony from the old Norman tower near at hand—the fine old square tower, with its crocketed finials, rising high above tiled roofs and picturesque gables, clustering on the summit of the hilly street. More distant bells came with a softer sound from a church on the other side of the river, and, mingling with these, came the shrill single bell of a Nonconformist conventicle. To that mourning mother's ear it

seemed as if the air were full of bells, and she thought, shudderingly, of that great bell of St. Sepulchre's, which she had read of tolling with funereal stroke for the passing of a sinner's soul. The bells had done their worst by seven o'clock in the evening, when Adrian entreated his mother to share the dinner that had been brought from the hotel for him. She had ordered her carriage to come for her at ten o'clock. They sat down at the shabby little table, in the light of a paraffin lamp, and each made a pretence of eating in the hope of encouraging the other.

There was to be an inquiry before the Magistrates to-morrow —an inquiry at which Adrian would appear in his new character—no longer a witness, but a prisoner, accused of being implicated in his brother's crime.

The morning came, with a low grey sky and a heavy mist, through which the long ridge of the moor showed darkly.

The Magistrates' room was crowded, as the Coroner's room had been. There were three Magistrates on the bench, all of whom honoured the name of Belfield and sympathized with the unhappy mother, who sat apart in her black raiment, with the old family lawyer by her side. Lord St. Austell and Colonel Deverill were present, and the legal element was represented by Mr. Cheyney, the sandy-whiskered gentleman from the Treasury; Mr. Distin, who watched the case on behalf of Colonel Deverill; and Mr. Tompion, Q.C., whom Mr. Gresham had engaged to protect his client.

Markham, *alias* Melnotte, sat near Mr. Distin.

The inquiry before the Magistrates involved a recapitulation of the evidence that had been given before the Coroner, except in the case of Sir Adrian, whose lips were now sealed, and who sat apart, with a constable standing near his chair.

The Doctor repeated his statement. Colonel Deverill once again declared his conviction that the body found in the Abbey river was that of his younger daughter, and again swore to the rings which she had worn. Again Mrs. Marrable reluctantly identified the Persian rug. The important question of identity was as fully established in the minds of the county magistrates as it had been in the minds of the Coroner and his jury.

The next question was how the deceased had come by her death.

That she had not drowned herself was established already by the evidence of the surgeon. That she had been killed by a blow upon the temple, and had been thrown in the river after death, was indisputable. Mr. Tompion cross-examined the medical witness in the endeavour to shake his testimony upon this point, but the attempt was half-hearted and futile.

Mrs. Marrable was severely handled in cross-examination by

Mr. Distin. She admitted that Mr. Belfield had been disturbed in mind since his wife's disappearance, and had seemed altogether an altered man; that he had avoided the rooms his wife had occupied, and had never been heard to mention her name. All this had been thought only natural in a gentleman whose wife had run away from him. She admitted that Sir Adrian's behaviour on the morning of Mrs. Belfield's disappearance had caused some talk in the household. One of the men-servants had met him on the stairs going up to his room early in the morning, and had been struck by his dejected countenance.

"Was that before Mrs. Belfield's disappearance was known to the household?" asked Distin.

"Two hours before."

Mr. Gresham objected that this was not evidence. It was only an impression derived from another person.

"We can call the servant who made the remark," said Distin.

At this moment there was a stir and the sound of voices at the further end of the room, near the door opening to the street, and then the crowd made way for a tall man in a furred overcoat, who came slowly up to the Magistrates' table. A silence of wonder came upon the whole assembly, which was broken only by a faint cry from Lady Belfield, who had risen hurriedly at the approach of her youngest son.

"Valentine!" she cried.

"Perhaps it would be as well to hear my account of the main fact before you waste time upon details," said Valentine Belfield.

He was pale but self-possessed, confronting all those eager faces calmly, as one whose mind had fully realized the worst that could befall him, and who was prepared to endure it.

"I am here to answer for the death of my wife," he said quietly, after the usual formula, standing like a rock, with his face towards the bench, and with an air of seeing no one but the Magistrates who sat there. "It was I who killed her."

The clerk began to take down his evidence, which was given with a deliberation that made the writer's task easier than usual.

"Yes, it was I who killed her. She had been a loving wife, and I had been a neglectful husband, over-secure in my confidence, forgetting that there are always scoundrels and profligates on the watch for such prey—a pretty woman with a careless husband, intent on his own pleasures. We had never quarrelled, and I had never seen occasion for jealousy, till one night in a railway carriage I overheard a conversation between two men which informed me that my wife was being pursued by a notorious seducer. At first I was inclined to be incredulous,

but on discovering certain facts connected with the sale of a horse which I had bought for my wife in good faith, but which had practically been the gift of her admirer, I saw that this person's intentions were as bad as they could be. The fact that he had been my particular friend would, I suppose, hardly make his conduct baser. The seducer is generally the husband's friend.

"I came down to Chadford without an hour's delay, meaning to save my wife, if there were yet time, but in no soft temper towards her. The first thing I heard upon arriving was that the seducer was living in the neighbourhood, in hiding. I entered my mother's house after midnight, with no worse intention than to call my wife to account for her falsehood and her folly, and to have a complete understanding with her. Such an explanation might have resulted in total severance, or in reconciliation. I had not asked myself which way it was likely to end. I was very angry; my heart and my head were both on fire. God knows I had no thought of killing her; but I desired nothing more keenly than an encounter with her lover.

"I found her after midnight, with her trunks packed ready for departure, all her preparations made. She was writing when I entered the room. She tried to keep the letter from me in her terror, but I snatched it out of her hand. This is the letter—unfinished."

The letter was handed to one of the Magistrates, who read it, first to himself and then aloud, amidst a breathless silence.

At the far end of the room, among the spectators, was a tall woman in black, who had entered immediately after Valentine, and who stood there watching and listening. She wore a small black straw bonnet, very plainly made, and a thick veil. Behind that veil, and in that bonnet, no one noticed Madge Darley's striking beauty. She was only one figure more in the closely packed crowd, all intent upon the man who stood in front of the Magistrates' table making a confession of his crime.

"We had some conversation after I had read that letter, a brief dialogue, which only served as a commentary on that text. She loved another man, and she had ceased to love me. She stood before me, looking me in the face and telling me that she meant to dishonour me.

"I couldn't stand this, and I lifted my cane and struck her. I suppose I meant to knock her down. I don't believe I meant to kill her."

There was a pause, and a little choking sound in his throat, before he went on very quietly.

"Unhappily, my cane had a loaded handle. I struck her on the temple, and she fell at my feet—dead. I hardly know

whether she breathed after she fell, for I was unconscious for some minutes. I believe I fainted.

"When I recovered my senses my brother was in the room. He told me that my wife was dead, and urged me to make the fact public at once, and to exonerate myself from any darker crime than that of which I was guilty—the crime of an unpremeditated blow, which had proved fatal. Had I been wise or reasonable, I should have taken my brother's advice; but I was maddened at the thought of my wife's treason and my own peril. I wanted to save myself from the hazard of an inquiry. My statement might not be believed; my crime might be called murder. I thought myself clever enough to escape any question about that night's work. My wife's letter announced her intention of running away with her lover. My wife's trunks were packed ready for the journey. The world should be made to believe that she had carried out her intention.

"Unwillingly, under strongest protest, my brother looked on while I carried my dead wife through the shrubbery to the river, and threw her in at a spot where I knew the water was deepest. I took measures to weight the corpse, and it would have lain there quietly till the crack of doom had no search been made. When the business was over, I left the park, and walked all through the rest of the night. I got into Bideford next day, and took a boat, and was knocking about the coast for a week or so before I went back to the Abbey.

"No one but my brother knew of my being at the Abbey that night: no one but my brother knew of my crime. His was not a guilty knowledge. He knew nothing until the deed was done; he gave me no help in getting rid of the body; he did his utmost to induce me to confess what I had done.

"This is all I have to say."

The constable who had charge of Sir Adrian was presently ordered to take Mr. Belfield into custody; but the prisoner was treated with considerable courtesy, and accommodated with a seat while the inquiry went on. As Valentine seated himself near his brother, Adrian stretched out his hand, and the brothers clasped hands silently, amidst the silence of the court. Lady Belfield sat with her head bent and her face hidden. There was a strange conflict of feeling in her breast. Gladness because her beloved had acted an honest part, apprehension at the thought of his danger, that peril of liberty and life, which he had of his own accord returned to face.

The next witness was one who had not been called previously, a witness whom Melnotte had hunted down since the inquest.

This was the man whose boat Valentine had hired on the 20th of August, and who swore to his passenger's strange manner,

and the state of physical exhaustion in which he had remained for a long time.

This was the only new witness. The others repeated the evidence given at the inquest, with such additional details as Sir Adrian's counsel or Mr. Distin could extort in cross-examination.

But there was no startling effect produced by any of these witnesses. It was felt by most people present that the drama was played out.

No one doubted the truth of Valentine Belfield's confession. He was there, a voluntary witness against himself, and there was the accent of truth in every word he had spoken.

His wife's own hand acknowledged her guilty intention, and in the unfinished letter there was some justification for the husband's violence. He had done well to be angry—but he had sinned in his anger. That was all. Between the justifiable anger that would have cast off an erring wife, and the savage fury which slew her, there was a wide gulf; and that gulf had been too easily crossed by the man who had never learnt to curb his temper or to control his evil passions. That was what most people in the Magistrates' Court thought about Mr. Belfield, as the brothers sat quietly, side by side, like and yet unlike, but never truer in their allegiance to each other, come weal, come woe, than they were to-day.

The result of the inquiry was that Valentine Belfield was committed for trial at the next assizes, charged with the wilful murder of his wife, Helen Belfield, on the morning of August 20th, while Sir Adrian Belfield was set at liberty, the Bench of Magistrates choosing to ignore those points in his brother's confession which showed that though he was guiltless of being an accessory *before* the fact he was admittedly an accessory *after* the fact. Local influence and spotless character bore down the weight of evidence, and there was a murmur of approbation in the room when Sir Adrian Belfield was ordered to be released from custody. Even the fact that he had deliberately perjured himself was forgotten.

Valentine slept that night in Exeter Gaol. Lady Belfield and Sir Adrian travelled by the same train that carried the prisoner, and took up their abode in comfortable lodgings near the Cathedral, where the heart-broken mother might dwell in retirement, exempt from the publicity of an hotel, where her entrances and exits would have been watched by a score of curious eyes.

During the five weeks which elapsed before the opening of the assizes, Lady Belfield never left Exeter. She saw her son every day, and spent many hours with him in his imprisonment, comforted by the mere fact of being in his company, comforted still more by the softened temper which he showed in all things.

His whole nature seemed to have been chastened by that agony of remorse which his resolute soul had struggled against in vain.

"I fancied I could forget that night, mother," he said, "blot the whole thing out, live out my life just as if no such horror had ever happened; but I did not know what the shedding of blood means. Never for one single hour of my life have I forgotten—never shall I forget, while I have a brain to remember. But I can bear the memory better now. It is not so heavy a burden."

"You have done all you could in atonement," said the mother fondly. "It was noble of you to come back."

"Noble! I should have been a contemptible cur had I hesitated, when I saw my brother's honour at stake. But perhaps I might have been that cur had it not been for a woman."

"What woman, Valentine?"

"One who has eaten the bread of dependence in your house, mother, but as good and true and noble a woman as you who gave that bread."

And then he told his mother the story of Madge Darley's life, from his wicked wooing in the idle autumn afternoons and her steady repulse of his overtures, to his last experiences in the Forlorn Hope. He spared himself in nowise, confessing how dishonourable his intentions had been in the beginning; how true and steadfast she had shown herself from first to last.

"And yet she loves me, mother, as men are not often loved. She has loved me from the first. She loves me none the less because of this cloud upon my life. She has been to this prison once a week since I was brought here. She has come all the way from London, leaving the work which she holds sacred, and she has sat with me here, hand clasped in hand for an hour or so, and then has kissed me good-bye, and has gone quietly back to her work, travelling so many miles just for that one hour. If ever I am a free man again, Madge Darley will be my wife. Will it wound your pride, mother, that I should marry a daughter of the people?"

"My dearest, if she is as good a woman as you think her, I will welcome her as my daughter. I would be grateful to her, even if she were an erring woman, for the sake of her devotion to my son."

"She is spotless, mother, and as true as steel."

Mr. Gresham and the famous George Tompion, Q.C., who was to conduct Valentine's defence, aided by a pair of clever juniors, had fully discussed the chances of the prisoner, and were of opinion that he would be acquitted on the capital charge. It would be a narrow escape perhaps, as the conceal-

ment of the body was a damning fact. But it was hoped that the wife's letter would influence the jury, and incline them to a lenient view of the circumstances, nor could the feeling inspired by the respectability of the Belfield family be ignored. There was no doubt that Lady Belfield's personal character would have weight with a judge and jury.

Mr. Tompion was not mistaken in this view of the case. He surpassed himself in the eloquence of his defence; he melted at his own pathos, and drew floods of tears from his audience. He dwelt on the agony of the husband's feelings, stung to madness by the treason of the wife he adored; he painted the peaceful family life—the mother with her twin sons, the domestic circle into which sin had never entered until the seducer came there like the serpent into Eden. He depicted the remorse of the unhappy man, who in one moment of madness had struck down the creature he idolized. How, in his horror at finding himself an involuntary assassin, he had tried to hide his deed from the light, had tried to forget what he had done. In vain, in vain.

"You have heard, gentlemen, that the prisoner was a changed man from that hour. He was no hardened reprobate. The pangs of conscience tortured him by night and day, and he knew not one moment of relief until he stood up before his fellow-men, and voluntarily confessed his crime, inviting whatever punishment the law might inflict."

And then Mr. Tompion went on to show that in no case could the crime be more than manslaughter. The act had been unpremeditated; the blow had been struck by an instrument which happened to be carried in the prisoner's hand, and to which no evil intent could attach itself. It had been the act of a single moment. The medical evidence showed that there had been but one blow, and that had been unhappily fatal. Yet it had not been necessarily fatal. Had the blow fallen upon any other part of the victim's head, it might have stunned, but it need not have killed her. There was nothing to show that the prisoner had ever contemplated her death. Had he taken his brother's advice, and at once alarmed the house, the suspicion of murder could not possibly have attached to him.

This, and much more, urged Mr. Tompion in mitigation of Valentine Belfield's guilt; and the Judge followed with a summing-up which strongly favoured the prisoner, albeit he took care to point out the reprehensible nature of all his acts after the fatal blow, and the wrong done to his dead wife's reputation and to the feelings of her kindred, in allowing her to be talked of as a runaway wife, while she was lying in her unconsecrated grave, unhonoured and unmourned. The whole course

of the prisoner's conduct after his fatal act must be considered as an aggravation of the guilt of that act, said the Judge.

The result was a verdict of manslaughter. The Judge pronounced sentence—two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

It was a heavier sentence than the sanguine had hoped for; but to Lady Belfield, whose fears had been terrible, this worst and last result of her son's wrongdoing seemed light. She clasped her hands in silent thankfulness when the sentence was pronounced.

There was another woman who stood with clasped hands, full of resignation—that woman who had promised to be his wife when his hair was white. Madge Darley saw him move slowly away from the dock between two warders, and knew that for two weary years the law would hold him in subjection like a little child, meting out his tasks and regulating every movement of his life. She knew that his slow hours would pass in automatic labours—cleaning his cell, going out and coming in at the word of command, working with a gang of other toilers, each the image of himself; eating, drinking, kneeling to pray by line and rule; living for the most part in a death-like silence, in which the ticking of the clock or the sudden opening of a door is almost too much for the prisoner's weakened nerves.

And this was all to be suffered by the spoiled child of nature and of fortune—the athlete whose life hitherto had been all activity; the sportsman to whom horse and dog and gun were among the necessaries of life; he who had been of so proud a temper, he who had never brooked control, not even the gentle restraint of love; he was to submit himself meekly to the government of a low-bred warder, to humble himself before hirelings and slaves—worse than a slave himself.

She thought of all this, sadly enough, as she lingered in the precincts of the Assize Court, waiting to question one of the officials as to the time of the prisoner's transference to Dartmoor, and the rules as to visitors there.

After waiting some time, she found a friendly sergeant, who told her the Dartmoor regulations, which seemed hard and cruel to her, who would have travelled from London to Devonshire every week just for the comfort of sitting by the captive's side for an hour, in mournful silence for the most part.

Sir Adrian met her as she was leaving the court.

"I have been looking for you, Madge," he said. "My mother would like to see you before you go back to London. May I take you to her?"

"I should like to see Lady Belfield very much. There is no train that will take me back to London this evening. I have engaged a room for the night, and shall go by an early train to-morrow."

"Then you can spend the evening with us. My mother wants to thank you for your devotion to my brother."

"She has no need to thank me. I have only obeyed my destiny. I could not help loving him. I loved him only the better in his misery than I loved him when he was proud and happy."

They walked together to the house in which Lady Belfield was lodging, and Adrian led Madge Darley up to the drawing-room, where his mother was sitting in an easy-chair by the fire, weeping for the son whom she must see so seldom in those two unhappy years. She had seen him led off as a criminal, to become one with other malefactors. It was not enough that he had confessed his guilt, that he suffered the slow tortures of remorse. He must pay the penalty. And he had looked so pinched and haggard in the grey winter light, and afterwards in the glare of the gas. Would he live to accomplish his penance? Would he ever come forth again into the light of day a free man?

Madge went over to the sorrowing mother and knelt down beside her. Lady Belfield put her arm round the girl's neck and kissed her.

"He told me all that you have done for him," she said. "I thank God that there is one other woman in the world who loves him as well as I do."

Mrs. Baddeley stayed with her father, and did all in her power to support his spirits through that terrible time between the discovery of the body and the conviction of the criminal. Lord St. Austell went back to London immediately after Valentine's confession. He felt that there was no more for him to do. His murdered love was avenged. His identity with the dead woman's lover had not been hinted at by any of the witnesses, nor had Valentine mentioned his name. Yet St. Austell knew that there were very few people in England who would not come to know that he was the man who had wrought this evil.

So far as it was in his nature to feel sorry for any sin of his life, he was sorry for the sin that had brought Helen Belfield to an untimely grave. Yet, even while remorse was still new and keen, he was capable of arguing with himself that the husband was the greatest sinner—first for neglecting his wife, and then for killing her.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A LAST APPEAL

Colonel Deverill started for Marseilles directly after the trial, escorting Leo and the poodle back to London on his way. From Marseilles he meant to cross to Ajaccio, and spend the next two or three months in Corsica. It was an out-of-the-way island, where he might get a little sport, and where he was not likely to meet many of his English acquaintances.

Leonora Baddeley was deeply shocked by the events of the last three months, and even the knowledge that the kind fellow from India was on his homeward way did not suffice to restore her spirits. Everything in her life was at sixes and sevens: her creditors impatient; Beeching inclined to be objectionable; and the poodle's domestic comfort hardly compatible with a husband in residence, inasmuch as the dear thing always required the most luxurious easy-chair in any room he occupied, and could sleep only on the fur rug by his mistress's bed, where he made the quiet night musical with his snores. There was not room for a divided duty on that small flat in Wilkie Mansions; and Leonora feared that when her kind, good fellow was restored to her, his first exercise of marital authority might be to turn her poodle out of doors.

And then, little by little, her involvements would be revealed to him; and the butcher and the baker, and the man who had supplied her with lamps and oil to feed them, would demand their due. How was she to face those gruesome revelations: how answer to her husband for having spent four times as much as her position justified?

She could almost have wished that the kind fellow's regiment had been forgotten by the authorities at the War Office, and left in India for the next ten years, as had happened once in the case of a distinguished regiment.

"*They* would have liked it," she told herself, "and it would have been such a relief to me."

She parted with her father at Paddington, he having refused to waste an hour in London. He was going by the night mail to Paris, and to Marseilles by the next morning's express.

"I hate London, and England, and every place that can remind me of my poor girl," he said.

He kissed his daughter in a sad farewell, and Tory stood up on his hind-legs and licked the Colonel's face, deeply sympathetic, and aware that there was trouble in the family.

"He is such a clever darling," said Leo; "I'm sure he knows disagreeable letters—bills and lawyers' horrid threats in blue envelopes—for he always brings them to me with an air of being sorry for me. When shall I see you again, father?"

"I don't know. I feel utterly beaten. My life has been a failure in most ways, Leo; but this last blow has crushed me. I don't feel as if I should ever take any interest in life again. I used to regret the passage of time, hated the idea of being an old man; but now I wish I were twenty years older, with my memory gone, and my senses dim, tottering upon the edge of the grave."

"It has all been very sad for us, but it was not half so dreadful for her," argued Leo philosophically. "Think how little she suffered. A few moments of startled surprise—one swift, strong blow that ended life in a sudden flash, and she was gone. She died in the zenith of her beauty, adored by her lover. It was ever so much better a fate than to have gone away with St. Austell, and for him to have grown tired of her in six months, as he most assuredly would."

"Don't talk about it," said the Colonel sternly. "There is no consolation any way. She perished in her youth and beauty, with her mind intent upon sin. She had not a moment for repentance. God be merciful to the poor light soul, and let half the burden of her sin rest on me, because I brought her up so carelessly, and never took pains to guide her steps into the right way."

"It is all too sad," sighed Leo; "she might have done so well if she had only kept her head."

Mrs. Baddeley had her burden to bear in the way of sympathetic speeches and condoling letters from all her particular friends, who had read and doubtless gloated over the account of the trial. They had pored over the unfinished letter; they knew all poor Helen's weakness, and her intended sin; they who had envied her for the effect she had made in Society, and who perhaps were secretly rejoiced at her evil fate. Leo had to endure condolence from all comers, and to say the same set phrases over and over again. "Yes, it was all too dreadful. I believe that wretched man was half-maddened. There was always a strain of madness about him;" and so on, and so forth, till she seemed to repeat the same sentences mechanically.

"I suppose twins often *are* little queer in their heads," replied one not over-wise lady.

The season was in full progress by this time, and fashionable drawing-rooms were bright with tulips and narcissi, but Mrs. Baddeley went nowhere. She wore deepest black, which looked wonderfully well against a background of yellow tulips: and she stayed at home, waiting for the good fellow from India.

She had put down her victoria; or it may rather be said that it had been put down for her, since the livery-stable keeper had refused to supply her any longer with horse and man, and held her carriage in pawn while he sued her for his account. She spent her days yawning over the works of Mudie, and playing with Tory, just as she had done in Devonshire; and she took her constitutional on the Bayswater side of Kensington Gardens early every morning, before the smart people were out. She would not drive anywhere, since there was degradation in the thought of a hired vehicle, while her own pretty carriage, with its neat appointments, was locked in a mouldy coach-house under a tyrant's embargo.

Mr. Beeching called upon her, but she said not a word about the victoria. He had been somewhat sullenly disposed since his bargain with Mrs. Ponsonby and his quarrel with St. Austell. He said that he had found out the hollowness of friendship. Leo felt that there would be no good in mentioning the victoria; so she wrapped herself in the dignity of her grief, knowing that she looked very handsome in the black gown for which Jay had not yet been paid, and which fitted her better than anything of the famous Ponsonby's.

The days were drawing nigh in which she might hourly expect her husband's arrival, and she was beginning to think about the little dinners she would give him, and how best she might soothe him, and reconcile him to Tory's existence, and to the burden of her debts.

"We shall not entertain this season," she told Beeching, "but you must come and dine here quietly whenever you can. Frank is so fond of you."

"And of a hand at *écarté*, at which he always wins," answered Beeching bluntly. "Yes, I shall like to come; Frank and I get on capitally."

It was the day after this little talk with Mr. Beeching that Leo's maid brought her a foreign telegram. The page had been sent home to his mother, as an expensive detail that must needs be suppressed in adversity.

The telegram was from Aden.

"Sorry to inform you, Major Baddeley died yesterday evening on board the *Metis*, of cerebral apoplexy. Will be buried here unless you telegraph other instructions.

"PHILPOTT, Regimental Surgeon."

The shock was severe, and there were pangs of remorse mingled with the widow's grief. She remembered how recklessly she had pursued her self-indulgent course, caring only for the pleasure or the triumph of the hour, proud of her beauty,

heedless of her husband's welfare; trying always to believe that to be soldiering under an Indian sky was the best possible thing for him. She remembered with how little gladness she had anticipated his return; how willing she would have been to leave him in India till his head was grey and his limbs were feeble. And now a sterner Captain than any of the officials at the War Office had ordered him to a further shore than the uttermost border of Afghanistan or the disputed limits of Burmah.

She had sighed over the loss of her independence—had feared to stand before the only man who had a right to interrogate her; and now he was snatched away and she was free—free to make the best of her life, free in the pride of her beauty, before time had put his withering finger on a single charm.

With that telegram still in her hand she looked at herself in the glass, and told herself that her armoury was in good order. She had lost no weapon by which such women as she have power over men.

"If *he* only cared for me," she said to herself, and then she stamped her foot passionately, and crushed the telegram in her hand.

She had no one to help her. Colonel Deverill was in Corsica; and she had no other near relation. Should she have her poor fellow brought home, to be carried into Gloucestershire, and laid in the burial-place of the Baddeleys? No, the Baddeleys had never done anything for him since his father's death. He had brothers, some rich, some poor. The poor brothers had been only remarkable for dropping in to lunch or dinner on precisely the most inconvenient occasions; the rich brothers had held themselves aloof.

"To bring him home would be dreadfully expensive," mused Leonora, "and I am almost penniless. No, he must be buried at Aden, poor dear. There is no help for it."

She telegraphed to the regimental doctor, and to the colonel, whom she knew, giving them full authority to act. And then she sent off an advertisement for the *Times*—"Suddenly, at Aden, &c. &c., deeply regretted"—in a thoroughly business-like manner; and then she sat down and cried. She wept for him honestly, after her fashion, telling herself how good he had always been to her, how easy, how indulgent; trying to persuade herself that she had been desperately in love with him at the time of her marriage, which she had never been at any time; telling herself that she would feel his loss immensely. She tried to awaken within herself all those stock sentiments which a loving wife ought to feel—and then her thoughts wandered off to the engrossing question of ways and means. Those harpy tradesmen would be more than ever ferocious now that she was a lonely widow. They would sharpen their claws to assail her.

They would listen to no more excuses, wait no longer for remittances from India. They would sweep off her pretty furniture, her bamboo and beads, her Japanese jars, fans, and feathers, and embroidered portières; all that bright-hued plumage which had made her nest so gay and pleasant to the eye of admiring man.

"They would take you, my dearest treasure, if they could," she cried hysterically, flinging herself upon the hearthrug and snatching the alarmed Tory to her breast. "But they shall never have you—no, not if you *are* worth eighty guineas and I am a pauper—never while I have life."

The announcement of her husband's death had the effect she feared, and the lawyers' letters in a day or two were more peremptory than before. There was also a shower of other letters, from condoling friends—the very people who had been continually asking, "And *where* is Major Baddeley?" "And *who* is Mrs. Baddeley's husband?" and who now wrote as if they had known and loved him, and blandly consigned him to a better world with quotations from Scripture.

Leonora had scarcely finished these customary tributes, when the maid brought her a telegram. "Major Baddeley was buried at seven o'clock yesterday morning, in the English Cemetery. Military honours."

"How nice," sighed Leo; "he could not have had *them* in Gloucestershire. Buried already! My poor, good-natured lamb. How dreadfully quick."

She was still studying the telegram—those few words meaning so much—when the electric bell sounded again, and the maid announced Mr. Beeching.

"I see you have had plenty of letters already," he said, glancing at the scattered correspondence on her table. "I wouldn't write. I thought it better to come."

"You are very good," she faltered, giving him her hand meekly, with lowered eyelids, remembering that he was the one man among all her intimates who could afford to help her out of her difficulties.

"I am not a humbug, Mrs. Baddeley. I'm not going to pretend that I'm sorry for your husband's death. As a man, I liked the Major well enough. He was my very good friend, and I was his, I hope. But he was your husband, and he came between me and the woman I love. Come, Leo, there's no need to beat about the bush. You have held me at arm's-length for years, because you were a wife. And though I've felt that I was being fooled—for you've blown hot and cold, don't you know, led me on and held me off—yet, dooce take it, I've respected you for keeping me at a distance."

"I always knew you were generous-minded," said Leo,

with a stifled sob, beginning to feel that her debts would be paid.

"You did your duty to your absent husband, and I honour you for it," pursued Beeching, admiring the beautiful head, with its dark shining hair, the heavy eyelids and long lashes, the perfect figure set off by the close-fitting black gown; "but you are a widow now, and you are free to reward my devotion. When will you make me happy, Leo? How soon may I call you my wife?"

"My dear Beeching, my poor fellow was only buried yesterday."

"Yes, I know. I am not going to ask you to marry me to-morrow. There is the world to be thought of, I suppose; though I don't care a hang about it. Will you marry me this day six months?"

"Don't ask me anything to-day. I am so utterly wretched. I cannot get that poor fellow's image out of my mind. Come to see me again in a week. I shall be calmer then."

Mr. Beeching would fain have persisted, but Mrs. Baddeley was firm, and he went.

She rose from her sofa when he was gone, and began to pace the room strangely agitated.

"To have unlimited money, a house in Park Lane or Grosvenor Place, to give the best parties in London, to have all those people who have been barely civil at my feet. They *all* worship money! Yes, that would be something. But then there is Beeching included in the bargain! To pass my whole life with Beeching—to see him every day—not to be able to send him away—to have him for my travelling companion wherever I went. Always Beeching; no escape, no variety. *That* would be terrible. Would Grosvenor Place, and a four-in-hand, and a yacht, and a large box on every first night, and everything in the world that I care for, counterbalance that one drawback—Beeching?"

She walked up and down in silence for a quarter of an hour, thinking intensely.

"I don't think I care much for money, or I should snap at Beeching," she told herself, and then in a sudden burst of passion she clasped her hands and cried: "Oh, to spend my life with the man I love, the only man I ever loved! That would be Paradise. There may be a chance even yet. He was so fond of her, and I am like her, and he cared for me first. If it is ever so small a chance, I will not throw it away."

She sat down at her desk, and wrote a telegram to Lord St. Austell, Park Lane.

"Let me see you here for half an hour on particular business. I shall wait till you come."

It was late in the afternoon when St. Austell was announced. The day was cold and dull, and in that grey light he looked ill and worn, aged by ten years since last season. He was in mourning, and his closely buttoned frock-coat had a severe middle-aged air.

"You summoned me, and I have come," he said, coldly touching Leo's offered hand. "I can't conceive why you should want to see me, and I think you ought to know how it distresses me to see you."

"I am sorry for that. I have had startling news, and I could not rest till I told you. St. Austell, I am free. My poor husband is dead. It is no longer a sin for me to talk of the past. Why cannot we both forget all the misery of last year? You were cruel to me—more cruel to that poor girl you tempted. But you may forget all——"

"Never. I have been untrue to other women. I shall be faithful to her until my dying day."

"You think that now, perhaps. You will tell a different story next year."

"I will wait for next year, and the heroine of the new story."

"And yet you once pretended to care for me," said Leo, trembling with indignation.

"It was no pretence. I did care for you—very much at that time. Only you cared so very well for yourself, you see! You cared so much more for yourself and for your own reputation than you cared for me. Orpheus trod the burning paths of Hell in quest of his love. You would not have put your little finger in the fire for my sake; and so, finding what you were—a woman of the world, worldly to the core—I fell out of love with you, somehow, just as easily as I had fallen in love. And then your sister came upon the scene—younger, fairer, fresher, and with a heart—which you had not."

"If it pleases you to think thus of me, so let it be," said Leo haughtily. "We can be friends, I suppose, to the end of the chapter."

She looked at him piteously, pleadingly, even while her lip affected scorn. Yes, he was the only man whose accents had ever touched her heart, whose face had ever haunted her. She could have flung herself on her knees at his feet, and kissed the wasted hand which hung listlessly at his side. She could have died as Helen had died, only to be loved by him for one hour. But she knew that all was over. Of that old fire which had blazed so fiercely for a season, not a spark remained.

"Tell me about my poor friend's death?" he asked civilly; and she told him all she knew.

And then, after a few trivialities, Lord St. Austell wished her good-day.

There was no help for it. It was her destiny to be burdened with Beeching.

EPILOGUE.

Two years had gone by since that day in which Lady Belfield saw her son led out of the dock as a convicted felon; and she was sitting in her accustomed place by the hearth in that innermost drawing-room which was her favourite—the room that held her own particular piano, and all her chosen books. She was sitting in the spring twilight, sad and silent, but not alone in her sadness. A girlish figure sat on the fender-stool at her feet, and a month old baby was lying in that girlish lap.

There were two Lady Belfields now in the old Abbey, a mother and a daughter-in-law who never disagreed, for the daughter was just that one woman whom the mother would have chosen out of all womankind for her son's wife.

Little by little in the sad slow days after the trial a new love had grown up in Adrian Belfield's heart, and he had learnt to admire and appreciate Lucy Freemantle's gentle character and unpretentious charms. There was no cloud upon the dawn of this new love. It came to him like the slow soft light of a summer morning, creeping up from the dark cold east, and gradually filling the world with warmth and brightness.

They had been married a little more than a year, and this happy union was the consolation of Constance Belfield's heart.

To-day that heart was to be tried by a joy that was too closely interwoven with grief. Her son was to be released from prison. He was to return to the house in which he was born, his crime expiated, his penance fulfilled; but he was to return only to die. For a long time his health had been broken. His strength had gradually decayed from the beginning of his imprisonment; and he had spent at least a third of his prison-life in the infirmary. And now his mother knew that he was given back to her marked for death.

She had been permitted to see him at stated times. The hard rules of prison discipline had been relaxed in his favour. She had knelt beside his bed in the big white airy ward, and had talked with him hopefully of the days when he was to be restored to her.

"I shall go back to you an old man, mother," he said, "fit for

nothing but to sit by the fire and yawn over a newspaper. I shall never hunt fox or stag, hare or otter. I shall never call myself a crack shot again. The springs are broken."

Of the contingency of non-return he had never spoken. His disease was that slow and insidious malady in which the sufferer hopes till the last. He knew that his constitution was shattered, but he did not know that his life was a question of a year or two at most.

Madge Darley went to see him as often as the prison rules allowed, and her presence cheered him like strong wine. He seemed always at his best when she was there; and even the eyes of love were deceived by the brightness of his looks and the hopefulness of his manner. It was only when the doctor told her the hard bitter truth—one lung gone, the other attacked—that she knew how vain a dream that was upon which her lover dwelt so fondly.

He was never tired of talking of their future life together.

"I am a poor feeble creature, Madge," he said, "but at least I shall not be a hindrance to your good work. I won't promise to clean the windows, but I can write your letters and keep your accounts. You must not live at the Forlorn Hope after our marriage; but we can have a snug little villa in the Kilburn Road, and you can give twenty-four hours in every week to the good work, as the other Sisters do."

She opposed him in nothing, knowing that this dream of his could never be realized. She saw the traces of gradual decay at each new visit, saw that the shadows were deepening and the end drawing nigh. She saw this and she mourned for him as one dead; but in all her sorrow she persevered bravely with the work which she had begun under such narrow conditions. The Forlorn Hope had prospered. There were three houses now in the dingy street off Lisson Grove, and there were nearly seventy ladies who each gave four-and-twenty hours in every week to the task of reclaiming fallen creatures of their own sex. The plan had answered admirably. The Sisters did not renounce the world and its affections, its domestic ties, or its social pleasures. They wore no distinctive habit, they affected no asceticism beyond a strict economy. They only gave a seventh part of their lives to the task of helping the wretched; but this much they gave ungrudgingly, and with a regularity which gave way to nothing less than serious indisposition. Any Sister who showed herself light-minded and inclined to play fast and loose with her duties was politely informed that she had no vocation for the work, and was requested to retire. Frivolity was thus eliminated at the outset; and, although many of the Sisters were young, all were earnest workers. Some were rich and some were poor; some brought the comforts and graces of life—

flowers, and hot-house fruit, and books and music, and rare old wines—from their luxurious homes, to cheer the sick and broken-hearted; some contributed largely to the expenses of the institution; others gave only their time and labour; but there was an equality of zeal and love which levelled all differences.

To-day Madge had gone to Dartmoor with Sir Adrian, to assist in the release of the prisoner. They had posted there and were to post back; five-and-thirty miles by moor and road, with a rest and a change of horses midway. They were to have left the prison at one o'clock, and it was now five. They might be expected momentarily. Just as the mother had sat listening for the sound of hoofs upon the gravel, expectant of her younger son's return from hunting, so she listened and waited now.

Hark! the steady trot of four horses. The carriage was in the avenue. Constance Belfield went out to the hall, motioning to Lucy to stay with her baby.

"I want to see him alone first," she said falteringly.

To be alone with him was impossible. The old butler and Andrew and Mrs. Marrable were there, ready to welcome the wrongdoer, almost as if it had been his return from a honeymoon. He walked a little in advance of his companions, carrying himself erect as of old, making a great effort against weakness. He shook hands hastily with the old servants, looking at his mother all the time, and then held out his arms and clasped her to his breast.

"At home at last, mother," he said, kissing the pale forehead and the soft silvery hair, which had whitened in the days of his captivity; "no more prison bars, no more galling restrictions. I belong to you and Madge henceforward."

"To me and Madge. Yes, dear. I shall not dispute Madge's claim," answered Lady Belfield, holding out her hand to the tall pale girl in black, who had once been a servant in that house, but who now entered it as a daughter.

They all went into the drawing-room, where Lucy had sent away her baby, and sat waiting for them in the glow of a great log fire, and where the tea-table was spread just the same as in the old days of the return from hunting. They sat round the hearth in a family circle, while Lucy poured out the tea; and all tried to be glad because he had come back to them, and all were full of sadness, because they knew he had returned only to die.

There is no one in London society better known than the beautiful Mrs. Beeching. Her portrait has been painted by three of the most famous Academicians, and has been exhibited for three consecutive seasons. Her dog Tory is a celebrity, and

is sought after as an attraction at charity bazaars. She is one of those ladies whom people who are struggling to get into Society always endeavour to know. Her drawing-room is the gate of a second-rate Paradise, one of the outer circles of the smart world. The great family of Parvenu Pushers have climbed a long way upward on the social mountain before they begin to drop Mrs. Beeching.

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